

What's the Difference Between Cleaners, Sanitizers, and Disinfectants?



Best practices for schools



It is important to know the difference between cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting (see box at right). All surfaces should be cleaned before sanitizing or disinfecting to remove any dirt or grime. Cleaning ensures that the sanitizer or disinfectant will be effective.

During an illness or outbreak, increase the frequency of hand washing and cleaning surfaces. Only disinfect targeted areas (as specified in the table below or as specified by the NJ Department of Children and Families). Overuse of disinfectants may lead to the spread of superbugs – germs that are not easily killed by disinfectants.

The table below highlights common areas and objects that should be disinfected or sanitized after cleaning.

CLEANERS: All-purpose cleaners (certified green cleaners/soap/detergent and water) remove dirt, grime and most bacteria and viruses. Cleaning also helps remove mold and allergens that can trigger asthma symptoms.

SANITIZERS: Sanitizers reduce microorganisms to safe levels on non-porous surfaces (metals, glass, hard plastic). Sanitizer labels should specify the surfaces they are intended to be used on. Sanitizers must be registered and are regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

DISINFECTANTS: Disinfectants kill multiple organisms including bacteria and many viruses on non-porous surfaces. Disinfectants are pesticides regulated and registered by the EPA.

Recommended Cleaning Protocols for Early Care and Education

Areas/Objects	Clean with a green cleaner	Sanitize	Disinfect
General: shelves, windows, high countertops, carpets, glass	yes		
Surfaces touched by many hands: include doorknobs, cabinet handles, stair railings	yes		yes
Diaper changing areas, bathrooms, cots, cribs	yes		yes
Water fountains	yes		yes
Floors, walls, partitions	yes		yes
Surface and objects contaminated with blood and body fluids	yes		yes
Kitchen: eating utensils, bottles, dishes; food preparation and serving areas (high chairs, meal tables)	yes	yes	
Plastic toys and pacifiers	yes	yes	

Reference: [\[USEPA\] Green Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting: A Curriculum for Early Care and Education](#)

OVER

Tips for choosing safer products for cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting:

- ✓ Go for less toxic cleaning products that have been tested and certified by a third-party group such as Green Seal, EcoLogo, [EPA's Safer Choice](#), or [EPA's Design for the Environment](#) (older EPA logo)
- ✓ Check the product label for the EPA registration number
- ✓ Pick sanitizers that are made for food contact surfaces
- ✓ Use hospital-grade classification for disinfectants
- ✓ Choose products with a “zero” rating on the Hazardous Materials Identification System (HMIS) health rating scale on the manufacturers Safety Data Sheet
- ✓ Look for less dangerous signal words on the label like “**Caution**” or “**Warning**” rather than “**Danger**” or “**Poison**”
- ✓ Select products with short contact time (the time the product must be left wet and in contact with germs to kill them)
- ✓ Prepare and use solutions safely according to the directions on the label
- ✓ Use products that are safe for oral contact when used on food contact surfaces or on items that may be mouthed by children

Look for these logos!



Always store cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting products out of reach of the children.