

TOOLBOX TALKS

A Quality Service Contractors Publication for Members

January 2015

Hand sanitizers—you know you need them, but what do you know about them?

By Elaine Quayle, Editor

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It's that time of year again. You probably had your flu shot clinic already and/or have encouraged employees to get their shots offsite. But you know you are facing the headache of numerous absences when colds, stomach bugs, and influenza really hit your facility. Hand sanitizers can be an important element in fighting workplace illness, but just what do you know about them?

You certainly have heard that hand hygiene is an important adjunct to immunization to fighting the flu in the workplace. In fact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that hand hygiene is one of the most important ways to prevent the spread of infections. Dr. William Schaffner, past-president, National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) and moderator of the NFID Influenza/Pneumococcal News Conference, has said, "In addition to an annual flu vaccine, everyday hand hygiene is an important step to help reduce the spread of infections that cause illness."



Samantha R. Williams, spokesperson for GOJO, inventors of PURELL® Hand Sanitizer, told BLR® that scientific studies conducted in real-world settings underscore the recommendations of experts that good hand hygiene is an important strategy to help prevent the spread of germs. "Access to PURELL Hand Sanitizer and hand hygiene education led to 20 percent reduction in absenteeism in a workplace setting," she says.

Practicing hand hygiene is important every time a worker's hands have contacted a potentially contaminated surface, such as:

- Hands of others (a handshake is a significant infection pathway)
- Doorknobs
- Handles (including microwaves, refrigerators, water dispensers, and material handling equipment)
- Copier, printer, or telephone buttons or parts
- Coffee pots and vending machines
- Elevator buttons and stair railings
- Bathroom fixtures (*Note*, bathroom door handles are actually not the most contaminated object in a restroom, and have less germs and viruses than desk tops. Since restroom doors push out, this is usually not a problem.)

To get employee buy-in and establish a culture of hand hygiene, establish norms and etiquette in your workplace, says Williams. Publicize these efforts through the use of posters, department meetings, the company intranet, and in other employee communications.



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Soap and water

Experts agree that hand hygiene primarily means hand washing! Hands should be washed with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and then dried with a paper towel or hot air dryer.

Williams advises companies to make sure that all hand soap dispensers are always clean, in good working order, and filled.

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When to use sanitizers

Of course, employees cannot run to the restroom to wash their hands every time they touch something or someone. Hence the practicality—and convenience—of alcohol-based hand sanitizers. Williams says the benefits of alcohol-based hand sanitizers for safeguarding public health are well-documented in many settings, because they are effective at killing germs on hands within 15 seconds of proper use, especially after sneezing and coughing and before touching food. In fact, alcohol is the most proven effective germ-killing agent.

Where to place sanitizers

“Hand hygiene needs to be accessible,” said Casey Krysiak, product manager, dispensing systems at GOJO, adding that GOJO recently unveiled its newest dispensing system, the PURELL ES Everywhere System, which is designed to fit in places that are unable to accommodate traditional dispensers, such as the break rooms, reception areas, and other high traffic areas. Williams says businesses should also place hand sanitizer dispensers near restroom exits to help prompt the one in four people who typically don’t wash their hands after using the restroom.

Facilities experts also stated that in some instances hand sanitizers can be placed on stands, such as in a lunchroom, where they may be more visible.

What type to use

Moisturizing non-alcohol sanitizers may feel more skin friendly, especially since sanitizers are left on the skin and are not rinsed off. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are also formulated with moisturizers to be used repeatedly without damaging the skin and are recommended by many leading health organizations including the CDC the World Health Organization, and Health Canada.

Note that hand sanitizers have expiration dates, usually 2 to 3 years, after which time the percentage of alcohol and other antibacterial agents decreases enough to diminish effectiveness, so be sure to inform your facilities staff.



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What else you should know

You may have read some things on the Internet about hand sanitizers that have caused you concern, such as:



Can sanitizer use cause skin conditions? The CDC reports that frequent use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers can lead to skin conditions such as chronic occupational dermatitis, however formulation matters. PURELL Advanced Hand Sanitizer has been developed to be used repeatedly without damaging the skin, and studies show that its use, even in high frequency conditions like healthcare settings, does not dry the skin out.

Certain types of industries, of course, are more prone to this situation, including food preparation, healthcare, and cleaning/maintenance. Use of harsh soaps during regular hand washing can also cause this condition, so choice of product is important.

When skin dries to the point that it splits, the protective aspect of the skin can be compromised, leading to increased chance of germs and viruses entering the body. Some industrial sanitizer manufacturers have begun producing companion products to prevent dryness from occurring.

Are hand sanitizers dangerous? You may have read on the Internet that hand sanitizers that contain alcohol, as recommended by the CDC, are flammable and hazardous, and thus it is a good idea to have a SDS (safety data sheet).

A SDS is a written description of a hazardous chemical and a source of information about it for employers and their workers.

According to Safety.BLR.com, SDSs are part of federal OSHA's hazard communication standard, and employers with workers exposed or potentially exposed to hazardous chemicals must comply with their requirements, including safe handling and control measures.

Williams explains, that "manufacturing facilities and other large companies typically have controlled processes and require safety data sheets for all hazardous chemical products that they bring into their facilities. As standard procedure, GOJO provides SDSs for all of its products in order to meet those requirements. Having an SDS for a product does not mean that it is unsafe in any way when used as directed."

Therefore, she adds, that the use of formulations such as PURELL are safe and effective when used properly.

To lessen any concerns about flammability, keep dispensers away from sources of heat or ignition and monitor dispensers with drip-pans so that pools of sanitizer do not collect.



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