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GREEN RESTROOMS

Green Restroom Care: All About Priorities

At one time, if you talked about Green Cleaning, most facility managers thought you were discussing environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals. But now we know green cleaning is a much broader concept than this. It encompasses all kinds of cleaning tools and equipment, from vacuum cleaners and floor care machines to microfiber cleaning clothes...even wipes.



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Many areas can be properly and effectively cleaned without the use of disinfectants and powerful chemicals.

When it comes to cleaning restrooms in an environmentally preferable way, there is even more involved than the tools and equipment we use. According to Stephen Ashkin, president of The Ashkin Group and long considered the “father of Green Cleaning,” we must also set priorities. By setting priorities as to what types of tools and chemicals need to be used for each restroom cleaning task, we can also help reduce cleaning’s impact on the environment.

Ashkin says this can best be explained by example; the one he uses illustrates how he has helped hospitals and medical facilities develop a green cleaning program. “The goal is to minimize the use of disinfectants and other chemicals that although effective in what they do, can prove harmful to the user, building occupants, and the environment,” he says. “To do this we section the [medical] location into three zones based on how they are used.” These zones are:

- **Critical Care Zones:** These are the areas in a medical facility where specific disinfectants are mandated by law.
- **Semicritical Care Zones:** These include areas such as restrooms, physical therapy rooms, and nonemergency clinics, where there may still be a high level of disinfection needed but where facility managers have greater flexibility when selecting products and can select green cleaning products.
- **Noncritical Care Zones:** These include administrative areas, shopping areas, and so on. Green cleaning products

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should be used in these areas.

Zoning School and Hospital Restrooms

We can see that a hospital location can be sectioned off into three zones to help reduce the use of powerful disinfectants, but how does this prioritizing apply to green restroom cleaning in schools and other types of facilities? Surprisingly, there are areas of a restroom that although they can be contaminated, may actually have limited potential of spreading infection and require fewer powerful chemicals than we currently use; conversely, there are other areas that do need attention but may not be receiving the type of cleaning they require to protect health. Case in point: Most of us will agree that the insides of a toilet bowl can be home to scores of pathogens, many of which can spread disease. But how many people actually touch inside the bowl? The possibility of cross contamination from a soiled toilet bowl is actually quite minimal. In most locations, only cleaning personnel using gloves and toilet bowl cleaning tools go anywhere near the insides of a bowl.

"This means toilet bowl interiors are actually one area we can likely minimize our use of powerful, costly, and potentially environmentally damaging cleaning chemicals and disinfectants," says Ashkin. "And we can put greater emphasis on the true 'hot beds' of contamination in a public restroom."

According to Ashkin, hot beds of contamination would include such areas as:

- Door handles
- Faucet, urinal, and toilet handles
- Partition handles
- Soap, paper towel, and toilet paper dispenser controls
- Sanitary napkin dispensers
- Floor areas immediately surrounding toilets and urinals

"We should note that cleaning these areas typically requires less disinfectant and chemical," says Ashkin. "And very often we can use a green cleaning alternative to disinfect and sanitize these areas, such as a hydrogen peroxide cleaner, often used in medical facilities."

The No-Chemical Option

A rather interesting study using cleaning wipes has recently been published. The study, conducted at the University of Alberta, found that although one swipe or surface cleaning using wipes treated or used with disinfectants are the most effective way to reduce bacteria loads on a counter or similar surface, these surfaces can be cleaned almost as effectively using no chemicals at all.

What the researchers did is "wipe-clean" contaminated surfaces using wipes and a saline solution. They found that after three of these cleanings the amount of bacteria on the surfaces was decreased by an average 88 percent.

"It was apparently the mechanical removal [of the bacteria], not a disinfectant, that produced these results," explains Angelo Poneris, customer service representative with Valley Janitorial Supply, Hamilton, OH. "This mechanical removal of soils and contaminants sanitized the surface and was the result of 'agitation,' a term used in the professional cleaning industry to describe the process of loosening and removing soils."¹

When it comes to green restroom cleaning, there are other ways to sanitize surfaces without the use of chemicals. Vapor systems, which do not require any chemicals, can be very effective. These systems do not agitate surfaces but employ water heated to extremely high temperatures—as much as 300° (F) to sanitize a surface. However, using these systems can be admittedly slow.

"An alternative that many facility managers are exploring is the use of no-touch cleaning systems, sometimes referred to as spray-and-vac cleaning," says Poneris. "Typically a cleaning agent is used but new tests indicate this may not be necessary."

Poneris is referring to recent studies conducted by an EPA-approved laboratory that indicates when used properly, certain no-touch type machines actually become a "sanitizing device" because they effectively sanitize surfaces without the need for chemicals. "They do this by spray-cleaning surfaces using up to 500 psi (pressure per square inch). This is simply another form of agitation."

What Did We Learn Today?

For those who watch the *Morning Show* with Joe Scarborough, you know he ends each broadcast asking everyone to say what they learned today based on that episode's discussions. When it comes to this article and green restroom cleaning, we trust you learned that areas of a restroom can be sectioned off, with different cleaning requirements employed in different sections, and that many of these areas can be properly and effectively cleaned without the use of disinfectants and other powerful chemicals. Additionally, we learned that there are options currently available that can sanitize surfaces, making them safe for human use, without the use of chemicals at all. Hopefully, you walk away realizing a little agitation can go a long, long way when it comes to cleaning.²

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¹Note that sanitizing and disinfecting are not the same thing. A disinfectant is a chemical agent that completely destroys all organisms on a surface within a set period of time, usually five to ten minutes. A sanitizer, in contrast, is a chemical or system that reduces the number of microorganisms on a surface by 99.999 percent, which is considered a safe level, and does so within about 30 seconds.

²For a no-touch cleaning machine to be classified as a sanitizing device by the EPA, it must provide at least a 99.9 percent reduction in targeted microbes on a surface after cleaning.



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