



The Link

October 15, 2008

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 10

Let Common Sense Rule in Public Restrooms

By Robert Kravitz

Recently, a man bumped his head on a low-hanging pipe in a public garage. Although he was not seriously hurt, his head started bleeding and he was taken to a hospital emergency room for stitches.

While waiting for the hospital staff to tend to his injury, he found himself washing his hands almost constantly after touching his bed, chairs, walls, and counters. And between washings, he would use hand sanitizers conveniently installed throughout the emergency room area.

Hospitals are not the only places in which people have become concerned about germs. In fact, many folks today act as if germs are lurking around every corner, just waiting to strike a victim.

We must not let paranoia be our guide. While prudent precautions are always necessary, we should also use common sense. The truth is, some restroom surfaces are more bacteria-ridden and dangerous than others, and simple precautions in all public restrooms can minimize health risks. Becoming more aware of where the “hot spots” are in public restrooms empowers and enables us to take proper precautions without going overboard.

- **High-touch areas:** Common high-touch areas include door handles, dispenser handles, partition doors, restroom railings, and light switches. These areas do tend to become germ centers. Proper and regular cleaning with sanitizers and disinfectants can help eliminate, or at least minimize, the problem.
- **Faucets:** Although sensor-controlled faucets are now commonplace, they are not as widespread in schools and medical facilities or in hotel guest rooms, which are used by different people every day. Germs do colonize on faucet handles, but proper cleaning and hand washing can help alleviate the problem.
- **Sinks:** Sinks are germ central. They tend to stay moist, making them breeding grounds for bacteria and germs. Contaminants from hands washed in the sink may cling to the sides of the bowl. Fortunately, most restroom users do not have touch the inside of sinks, which minimizes the possibility of cross contamination.
- **Toilets:** Surprisingly, studies report that toilets are *not* a common vehicle for transmitting infections. It becomes a problem only if someone touches the toilet seat with his or her hands, or if someone has a cut on the buttocks or legs.
- **Sanitary napkin dispensers:** The lids on conventional “swing-top” sanitary napkin dispensers are reported to be the second-most – and sometimes the most – germ-ridden area of a women’s restroom. According to the American Society of Microbiology, “The outside of a sanitary napkin receptacle is one of the most contaminated hot spots in the ladies room.”

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The “Napkin” Problem

Although it is rarely discussed, sanitary napkin disposal can cause a lot of trouble for a facility. Because napkins are often flushed down toilets, they have become one of the major causes of plumbing and sewer backup problems for building owners. Additionally, when feminine hygiene products and sanitary napkins are flushed down the toilet, they can pollute streams and rivers, cause hormonal changes in wildlife, and trigger harmful organisms to enter the food chain.

Although they are called “sanitary” napkins, that is actually a misnomer. Once used, the napkins become a breeding ground for harmful bacteria or germs. What complicates the issue – and makes them such a problem for facility managers and owners – is many women fear touching the lids on conventional napkin-disposal units because they already know these are often unsanitary.

Another issue that must be addressed is the health of the cleaning professional. The inside of the typical disposal unit often stays moist, allowing germs and bacteria to grow. If the custodial worker is not wearing gloves, this can be a serious health risk.

More Hygienic Alternatives

Fortunately, as restrooms have become more high-tech and no-touch focused, products and services that help eliminate these problems have evolved. Some of the most technologically advanced systems are totally foot operated, while others are controlled by infrared sensors. The lid automatically opens and closes as the user’s hand comes near the top of the system. There is no touching required, and the units are designed so users cannot see inside the disposal unit when the lid is opened. Also, a deodorizer is released when the disposal unit is used, helping to keep it and the restroom clean and sanitary.

Further, instead of relying on cleaning professionals to clean and maintain the units, there are now restroom hygiene services that actually remove them from the facility and replace them with fresh, hygienically cleaned units on an established rotation. Services such as this, although well established for decades in Europe and other parts of the world, have just become available in the United States and are proving to be a welcome business opportunity for building services contractors and other entrepreneurs.

Robert Kravitz is a writer for the professional cleaning, healthcare, education and building industries. He may be reached at info@alturasolutions.com.

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