

Healthy Restroom Cleaners

By John Richter



After losing residents in the 1980s, Georgia's population grew 26 percent during the 1990s. Nearly 2 million people moved to the state, with the majority of them settling in and around Atlanta.

Job growth was one key reason they were moving to Atlanta. By the end of the decade, the area had the country's fourth largest concentration of Fortune 500 companies and more than 75 percent of the Fortune 1,000 companies.* With these mega companies, scores of smaller, supporting businesses either moved to Atlanta or were started there as well.

All of these companies needed office facilities, and in the late 1990s, a California building service contractor (BSC) moved to Georgia to take advantage of this office. His first big customer was a chain of child-care centers. He won the contract to clean 15 facilities.

Excited about the contract, but with few workers, the BSC worked with his crew cleaning many of the centers. The work came to an unfortunate halt about three weeks into the new venture, however, when one afternoon the BSC became very ill. By the next day, found himself in the emergency room, diagnosed with hepatitis A.

Several children and staffers at two of the centers also contracted hepatitis A. Public health officials were called in and reported that pathogens associated with the disease were found in several areas but predominantly in the restrooms on faucets

and fixture handles, dispensers, window ledges, and door handles.

Looking back, the BSC realized he had done just about everything wrong to protect his health. He did not wear gloves or any protective clothing, was sporadic about washing his hands, and did not appreciate that some types of locations, such as child-care centers—and sparticularly their restrooms—may have a greater potential than others for harmful germs and bacteria.

Respect for Our Own Health

Some cleaning staff may consider themselves invincible. This might stem from the fact that those who cleaned facilities more than a decade ago rarely wore gloves or had any concern about contracting a disease as a result of their work.

But this all changed with the outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome—SARS; Norovirus; and methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*—or MRSA—which is often found in restrooms and locker rooms. and other public health scares. These outbreaks have taught everyone—including cleaning workers—how easily health-threatening germs and bacteria can spread via cross contamination in restrooms (and elsewhere).

So the first step in staying healthy is to realize that we are not invincible, that we can and do get sick as a result of our work. For some cleaning workers, this may require a change in the way they view themselves, their work, and their industry. In the book *Protecting the Built Environment: Cleaning for Health*, author Michael A. Berry states, "One of the greatest and most necessary challenges we face today is to get people to look differently at cleaning and value it. [But] for this change to hap-

Did You Know?

- 2/3 of adults in the U.S. wash hands after using the bathroom (1/3 do not!).
- 1 in 4 adults don't wash hands after changing diapers.
- 1 in 3 wash hands after sneezing/coughing.
- 1 in 3 E.coli occurrences is caused from not washing hands before handling food.

Source: the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

pen, we need to reshape the way the cleaning industry looks at itself.”

Berry is saying cleaning workers must have more respect for themselves and their work, and along with it, their own health. They must learn and follow those standards and guidelines that first protect their own health as they work to protect the health of building occupants.

The Importance of Hand Washing

It cannot be overstated how important proper hand hygiene is for cleaning workers. Washing with warm, soapy water for approximately 20 seconds is recommended. Also, rubbing fingernails against the palm of the opposite hand helps remove bacteria lodged under the nails.

Along with proper hand washing, hand sanitizers should be used. But cleaning workers should be aware that hand washing and the use of sanitizers are not the same. Hand washing cleans hands by removing soils and contaminants from hands. Sanitizers, conversely, kill germs and bacteria, but they do not necessarily remove contaminants from hands. They should be used as a temporary measure to supplement frequent hand washing.

The Importance of Gloves

Next to regular, frequent, and proper hand washing, the most important step cleaning workers can take to protect their health when cleaning a restroom (or anywhere for that matter) is to wear gloves. Unfortunately, although most cleaning workers are well aware of their importance, gloves are often still not worn as frequently as they should be or as required.

For cleaning workers, gloves should be worn whenever there is the possibility of touching a contaminated surface. And since we now know that many surfaces once thought relatively safe, such as desks, are far more contaminated than we realized, a

good practice is for gloves to be worn at all times when performing cleaning tasks.

The proper selection of gloves is critical, and the type chosen depends on where and how they are used. For instance, thicker utility gloves should be worn when cleaning potentially infected surfaces such as those in restrooms and medical locations. For vacuuming, mopping floors, or using cleaning equipment, lighter vinyl gloves will likely suffice.

Removing the gloves can be almost as important as wearing them. If proper removal procedures are not followed, hands can become contaminated, potentially spreading disease. The proper way to remove gloves is:

1. Grasp the outside edge of the left-hand glove at the highest point near the wrist.
2. Peel the glove off the hand, essentially turning the glove inside out.
3. Keep the removed glove in the gloved right hand and discard.
4. For the right-hand glove, slide the index finger under the glove at the highest point near the wrist.
5. Peel the glove off from the inside and then discard.
6. Wash hands thoroughly using soap and water.

Cleaning for Health & Our Own Health

We often hear the expressions “cleaning for health,” “health-based cleaning,” or “hygienic cleaning.” These usually refer to systems and cleaning procedures designed to protect the health of building occupants. However, these systems can and should also be employed to protect the health of cleaning workers, especially when it comes to restroom maintenance.

For instance, color-coding methodology, which designates different-colored microfiber cleaning cloths for specific cleaning tasks, can also serve as a warning for

cleaning workers. If red microfiber cleaning cloths are used to clean toilets, as an example, cleaning workers should know to always wear proper gloves when handling these cloths once soiled and to take other handling precautions.

Many times, to protect worker health in restroom cleaning situations, the touching of surfaces should be avoided altogether. Instead of manually wiping surfaces, spray-and-vac or no-touch cleaning systems are recommended. With these systems, surfaces do not need to be touched by the custodial worker. The equipment applies a chemical to surfaces to be cleaned, such as sinks, toilets, counters, and door handle, that is then rinsed away.

Some machines have a built-in wet-vac system to remove liquids and contaminants and expedite drying time. Further, a select number of spray-and-vac machines are now recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as sanitizing devices without the need for cleaning chemicals. (According to EPA regulations, to qualify as a sanitizing device, a no-touch cleaning system must be able to sanitize without chemicals, produce 500 psi, which is powerful enough to loosen and remove contaminants, and have a three-stage vacuum motor.) Using no chemicals reduces cleaning’s negative impact not only on the environment but on the cleaning worker as well. Systems and procedures that help protect the health of cleaning workers should be included in all training programs since ultimately, a truly professional cleaning worker is one who has learned how to protect the health of building occupants as well as his or her own. ■

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