

Understanding the Differences Between Cleaning, Sanitizing and Disinfecting

BATON ROUGE, LA, UNITED STATES, October 9, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting are terms frequently used interchangeably, but each describes a different process. Understanding those differences can help facilities establish procedures appropriate for offices, restaurants, schools, healthcare environments and other commercial spaces.

Cleaning generally refers to the physical removal of dirt, debris, organic material and many germs from a surface. Sanitizing reduces the number of certain microorganisms to levels considered acceptable under applicable public health standards. Disinfecting involves using an appropriate chemical product to kill or inactivate specified microorganisms on surfaces according to the product's directions.



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Destin Pizer

According to [Destin Pizer](#), owner of [Schneider Paper Products](#) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, understanding the terminology matters because each process has a different purpose.

“Cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting may involve some of the same surfaces, but the terms do not describe the same

process,” Pizer said. “The condition of the surface, the type of facility and the reason for treating the area all help determine which procedure may be appropriate.”

Cleaning commonly serves as the starting point.

Soap, detergent, water and mechanical action can remove soil, food residue, grease, dust and other material from surfaces. Cleaning can also reduce the number of germs present by physically removing them.

A surface that looks clean, however, has not necessarily been sanitized or disinfected.

The reverse is also important. Applying a disinfectant to a visibly dirty surface may not produce the intended result because dirt and organic material can interfere with the product's ability to contact microorganisms.

For that reason, product labels commonly include instructions concerning pre-cleaning when surfaces contain visible soil.

Sanitizing serves a different purpose.

The process reduces certain microorganisms on a surface to levels established by public health requirements or standards. Sanitizing is commonly associated with food-contact surfaces, although specific procedures depend on the environment and applicable regulations.

Restaurant tables, food preparation surfaces, utensils and equipment may require cleaning followed by sanitizing as part of routine procedures.

Concentration and contact time matter when chemical sanitizers are used.

A sanitizer mixed at an incorrect concentration may not perform as intended. Contact time refers to the amount of time a product must remain on a surface to achieve the result described on its label.

Removing a product immediately after application can prevent the surface from receiving the required contact time.

Disinfecting is different from both cleaning and sanitizing.

Disinfectants are designed to kill or inactivate specified microorganisms on environmental surfaces when used according to label directions. In the United States, surface disinfectants making antimicrobial public-health claims are regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Product labels identify organisms against which a disinfectant has demonstrated effectiveness and provide instructions for dilution, application and required contact time.

Pizer noted that the label is an important part of the process.

"The product label explains how a sanitizer or disinfectant is intended to be used," Pizer said. "Mixing instructions, contact time and surface compatibility can affect the process, so using more chemical or wiping a surface immediately after application does not necessarily produce a better

result.”

Contact time is sometimes overlooked during routine cleaning.

A disinfectant may need to keep a surface visibly wet for a specified period. That period can vary by product and by the organism being addressed.

Spraying and immediately wiping may therefore be different from the procedure described on the label.

Using additional chemical does not automatically improve effectiveness either.

Products are formulated and tested at particular concentrations. Excessive concentrations can create residue, increase chemical exposure or affect surfaces and equipment.

Surface compatibility represents another consideration.

Some disinfectants can affect certain metals, plastics, fabrics, flooring materials or finishes. Repeated use of an incompatible product may contribute to discoloration, corrosion or other deterioration.

The location of a surface can also influence which process is appropriate.

A dusty office shelf may simply require cleaning.

A food preparation surface may require cleaning and sanitizing.

A frequently touched surface in a healthcare or illness-related setting may require cleaning followed by disinfection using a product appropriate for the intended application.

High-touch surfaces can include door handles, counters, shared equipment, restroom fixtures and other areas frequently contacted by hands.

That does not mean every surface in every building requires constant disinfection.

Cleaning remains an important part of routine facility maintenance, while sanitizing and disinfecting are used according to the environment, level of risk and applicable requirements.

Safety also matters when chemical products are involved.

Cleaning chemicals should be stored and handled according to manufacturer instructions. Certain products should never be mixed because chemical reactions can produce hazardous gases or other dangerous conditions.

Bleach products, for example, should not be mixed with ammonia or certain acidic cleaners.

Ventilation and personal protective equipment may also be required depending on the chemical and application.

The differences among cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting ultimately come down to purpose.

Cleaning removes dirt and material from a surface.

Sanitizing reduces certain microorganisms to established levels.

Disinfecting kills or inactivates specified microorganisms according to a product's labeled claims.

Each process has a place within facility maintenance.

Understanding which process is being performed, which product is being used and how that product is intended to work can help prevent a common mistake: assuming that a surface receiving some type of chemical treatment has automatically been cleaned, sanitized and disinfected at the same time.

The words may sound similar, but the processes are not interchangeable.

About Schneider Paper Products

Schneider Paper Products is located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and supplies paper products, janitorial supplies, cleaning chemicals and related facility-maintenance products for commercial and institutional environments.

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