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The message about the critical importance of cleaning is possibly stronger now than ever before, but with that message come terms which may not always be clear. The terms 'cleaning', 'sanitizing' and 'disinfecting' are regularly utilized synonymously, and yet there is a critical distinction among the three:

CLEANING – the action of making something clean, i.e. to remove dirt, microorganisms, marks, stains or other impurities.

Cleaning with general cleaners removes dirt particles, debris and many microorganisms from a surface giving it a "clean" appearance, but general cleaners are not specifically designed to kill pathogens that can cause an illness. Sanitizers and disinfectants reduce or remove, respectively, the bacteria count on a surface, yet it is important to understand their differences, in order to know which products to choose for which job. It is worth noting that in the current case of the coronavirus, it has been demonstrated that traditional detergents and soaps are effective in deactivating the virus by dissolving its lipid outer membrane, rendering it harmless.

Good practice dictates that any cleaning process starts with using a general-purpose cleaner to remove grease, dirt and debris particles. This should happen before any sanitizing or disinfection steps are undertaken, as the remaining dirt otherwise "consumes" the effective ingredients in either a sanitizer or a disinfectant. After the surface is properly cleaned, it is then important to decide whether to sanitize or disinfect.

SANITIZER – an anti-microbial agent that kills or renders inactive most bacteria, fungi, and some viruses that are present on a surface. Sanitizers reduce microorganisms on a surface to a level considered safe by public health standards, which is a 99.9% reduction within 30 seconds.

DISINFECTANT – an agent that destroys, neutralizes or inhibits the growth of microorganisms. Disinfectants go a step beyond sanitizers to make a surface safer. These products include bactericides, fungicides, virucides, each of which kills a specific type of microorganism – bacteria, fungi or viruses, respectively. Disinfectant kills nearly 100 percent (99.999 percent) of bacteria, viruses and fungi on a surface in a 5 to 10-minute period.

The distinction between sanitizers and disinfectants may seem small, but consider that surfaces contain millions of pathogens, and depending on the microorganism, only a few particles may be necessary to spread infection.

The other important thing to consider is which particular virus, bacteria or fungi a disinfectant is effective against. There are some areas where using a sanitizer to kill the majority of germs is adequate. For instance, in the foodservice industry, sanitizers are sufficient to clean dishes and utensils, as well as tables and surfaces in a restaurant. The sanitizer kills germs effectively and quickly so that surfaces and tableware are ready for repeated use.

Where building occupants are more vulnerable to germs, there will be a greater need for disinfecting, such as in healthcare, education settings, or senior living facilities. At the same time, those servicing office buildings should still disinfect high-touch surfaces, such as elevator buttons, door handles and toilet flush handles. Disinfectants are also recommended in areas where occupants come in direct contact with a surface, such as a shower floor in a gym, where athlete's foot might be a concern.

In all of this, we should remember that thorough and effective cleaning results in what can be called "Justified Disinfection". This principle argues that effective and thorough cleaning with high quality detergents across all non critical touch surfaces is as effective, if not more so than widespread use of disinfectants; the application of the disinfectant being justified. By removing dirt and sources of food for pathogens from a surface through rigorous cleaning, the microbial load on any surface can be brought to levels that are not considered harmful. The regular and widespread use of disinfectants does not provide a clean surface and can promote the development of resistant pathogens. Therefore, they should be used only on critical high frequency touch surfaces - door handles, keyboards, lift call buttons, handrails etc.

InnuScience's range of surface detergents offer effective deep-down cleaning and a residual cleaning action thanks to the integrated biotechnology that cleans even after use, and is especially effective on porous surfaces.

At a time when we are all being bombarded with suggestions, guidance, news, tips and sometimes contrasting information, its good to take a step back and get some clarity. The message though in this period of COVID-19 is to clean, clean properly and to make sure you use the right products in the right places, at the right time.

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