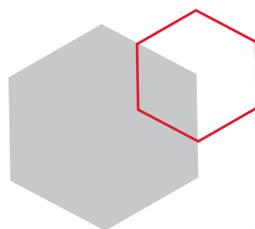


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## Maintaining Employee Health & Safety

Best Practices for Limiting Outbreaks and Facility Closures



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



## **I. Creating Safer Work Environments**

New Expectations Arise.....Page 3

## **II. The Problem with Pathogens**

Key Illnesses of Concern.....Page 4

## **III. The Role of Cleaning**

Protecting Public Health and Brand Reputation.....Page 6

## **IV. What to Look for in a Cleaning Service Provider**

Choosing the Best Fit for Your Facility.....Page 7

## **V. Preventing and Reducing Illness Among Employees**

Tips for a Safer Workplace.....Page 9

## **VI. Maintaining Employee Health is a Team Effort**

Executing a Thorough Cleaning Program.....Page 10



## I. Creating Safer Work Environments

### New Expectations Arise

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), its MicrobeNet database offers complete profiles for more than 2,400 pathogens.<sup>1</sup> MicrobeNet focuses on rare, disease-causing microbes, meaning that the directory contains just a fraction of the total number of illnesses that can infect humans through bacteria, fungi and viruses.

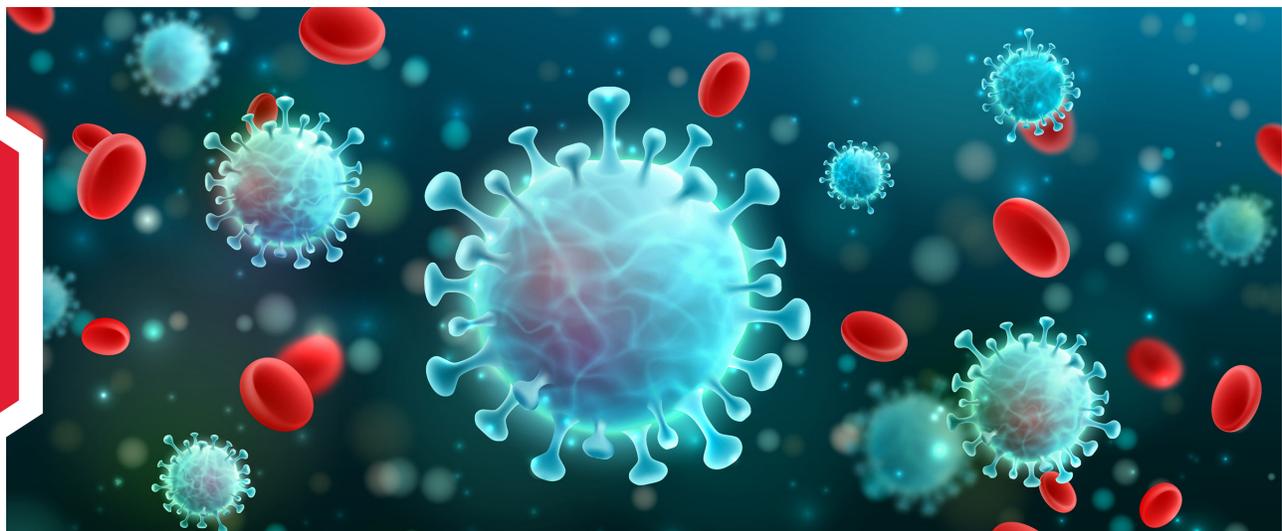
Each day, building occupants can be exposed to a variety of different pathogens that are spread through contact with contaminated surfaces or infected individuals. This creates a need for organizations to implement effective cleaning protocols to make workplaces safe for all people, even the most vulnerable.

While viruses such as norovirus, influenza and SARS-CoV-2 (which causes COVID-19) pose a serious threat to employee health, another cause for concern is indoor air quality (IAQ). Poor IAQ can cause symptoms such as headache, fatigue, shortness of breath, hypersensitivity and allergies, and irritation of the eyes, nose, throat and skin. Multiple factors, like HVAC system efficiency, the types and composition of cleaning and disinfecting chemicals used in the facility and cleaning frequency can have a substantial impact on IAQ.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made the public more concerned about their health and safety than ever before. Although some people were instructed to work from home, 83% of all respondents in Honeywell's global 2020 Building Occupant Survey Report said that they have continued to work inside a building either full or part time. Only 54% of those respondents feel their building management has taken the steps to keep them safer during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

The findings are not promising, especially since 61% of Americans say they would feel more confident if a facility has implemented additional cleaning and disinfecting protocols, including professional application of a disinfectant or sanitizer.<sup>3</sup> Employees, customers and building occupants want to feel confident that there are measures in place to protect them from outbreaks. Moving forward, the public will expect a higher level of cleanliness, putting additional pressure on organizations to uphold cleaning, disinfecting and infection prevention protocols.

Taking the necessary steps to ensure employee and visitor safety was always important, but it's even more critical now as we navigate through this new normal. Understanding outbreaks, the important role of cleaning and best practices for selecting a qualified building service contractor (BSC) will enhance worker confidence in building safety, resulting in satisfied employees.



4

## II. The Problem with Pathogens

### Key Illnesses of Concern

There are many pathogens that can impact facilities and their occupants, resulting in increased employee absences and presenteeism, which occurs when staff come to work while sick. Both of these situations have a negative impact on productivity and profitability. For years, facilities prepared for influenza and norovirus outbreaks on an annual basis, as these are typically the most common causes of widespread outbreaks throughout offices, educational facilities and other places of business.

**Influenza** is a highly contagious virus that causes widespread outbreaks. Also known as “the flu,” it is a respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat and sometimes the lungs. From October 1, 2019 through April 4, 2020, the CDC estimates that between 39 million and 56 million people suffered from flu illnesses that resulted in 410,000 – 740,000 hospitalizations and up to 62,000 deaths in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

● **Norovirus** is the most common form of gastroenteritis more commonly referred to as the stomach flu. It is a virus that is usually transferred through contaminated food, and sickens 1 in 10 people every year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 420,000 people die as a result of norovirus annually.<sup>5</sup> This highly contagious virus is considered one of the most difficult viruses to inactivate because it's non-enveloped and can survive on most surfaces for days or weeks. Even more challenging, infected individuals remain contagious for up to two weeks after symptoms disappear.<sup>6</sup>

Now, facility managers and cleaning professionals also have to prepare for emerging pathogens of concern, sometimes with little warning. In 2020, organizations scrambled to respond to and recover from SARS-CoV-2 as COVID-19 cases rose dramatically around the world.

● On March 11, 2020 the WHO declared **COVID-19** a global pandemic.<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 is a highly contagious and infectious disease that spreads primarily through saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. According to the CDC, the illness seems to spread more easily than the flu as it takes longer for people to show symptoms and the timeline for being contagious may be longer.<sup>8</sup> After only one year into the pandemic, the U.S. reported nearly 30 million total cases with close to 530,000 deaths. Worldwide, there have been 118 million total cases and 2.62 million deaths.<sup>9</sup>

While controlling flu and norovirus outbreaks is always challenging, facilities were especially unprepared for the extensive issues caused by COVID-19. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), outbreaks such as COVID-19 result in absenteeism and presenteeism that greatly reduces employee satisfaction and productivity.<sup>10</sup> Employees may be sick, acting as a caregiver for a sick or at-risk family member or even uneasy about coming back to work because of fear of exposure.

Outbreaks such as the flu, norovirus and COVID-19 negatively affect workplaces in multiple ways. They not only cause sickness among workers, but they can impact organizations on a larger scale. For example, a study from researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that foodborne illnesses can cost a restaurant anywhere from \$6,000 to over \$2 million depending on the severity.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the flu costs the U.S. as a whole nearly \$10.4 billion for hospitalizations and outpatient visits for adults.<sup>12</sup> A staggering 17 million workdays are missed per year because of the flu, and sick days and lost productivity cost employers nearly \$7 billion.<sup>13</sup> Finding ways to uphold employee health and safety can thus have a big return on investment.

The pandemic caused a shift in commerce demands, with the need for infection prevention and hygiene products like disinfectant wipes, hand sanitizer and paper towels greatly increasing while the availability of consumer goods decreased. It also resulted in an interruption to the supply and delivery chain. When essential solutions aren't readily accessible, it can negatively affect businesses that are attempting to uphold cleanliness and public health.



### III. The Role of Cleaning

#### Protecting Public Health and Brand Reputation

Reducing the spread of pathogens throughout facilities is a critical part of ensuring public health and safety. Germs can live for hours,<sup>14</sup> days<sup>15</sup> or weeks<sup>16</sup> depending on the surface and the virus. Personal hygiene habits, like proper handwashing, are especially instrumental in reducing the spread of germs among people. However, personal hygiene alone is not enough.

A robust cleaning program is necessary for illness prevention. When combined, effective cleaning protocols and personal hand hygiene habits can keep an outbreak from becoming catastrophic.

While cleaning professionals are now “cleaning for health” rather than just “cleaning for appearance,” it’s still important to understand how cleaning enhances brand perception. There are a few aesthetic areas in facilities that can negatively affect a customer’s impression of a brand. This includes entrances and restrooms, which are often some of the smallest areas of a facility but deliver the biggest impact. Dirty floors and malodors can speak volumes about an organization’s commitment to cleanliness.

Cleanliness is a key factor when attracting customers, as well as keeping employees happy. In fact, a 2020 Harris Poll found that 81% of Americans think employees are more likely to value their job when employers supply high-quality, “luxury” restroom products such as no-touch dispensers, air fresheners, restroom cleaning services, restroom mats and scented hand soaps.<sup>17</sup> Retaining current customers and employees is much more affordable compared to acquiring new customers and talent. Thus, it is in an establishment’s best interest to make small investments that promote cleanliness and hygiene.

Another important yet sometimes overlooked aspect of cleaning is that it promotes better IAQ. To achieve good IAQ, facility managers and BSCs must start at the surface. Regular and high-quality cleaning and disinfecting in all areas of a facility can help remove and control indoor air pollutants while limiting the risk of health-related triggers.<sup>18</sup>

An effective way to remove biological pollutants and avoid adding chemical pollutants to the air is by harnessing a sustainable approach to cleaning. This includes vacuuming with HEPA filters to contain and reduce exposure to asthma and allergy irritants, and avoiding commercial cleaning products that contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Using cleaners that include bleach and ammonia, the most common VOCs in cleaning products, greatly contributes to poor IAQ.<sup>19</sup>



## **IV. What to Look for in a Cleaning Service Provider**

### **Choosing the Best Fit for Your Facility**

Selecting a qualified service provider for commercial cleaning is key. First and foremost, it gives employees and customers peace of mind that facilities are taking cleaning – and in turn, public health and safety – seriously. This is especially important during a global pandemic. Additionally, BSCs that recognize the value of sustainability and use environmentally responsible chemicals, equipment and processes simultaneously help protect people and the planet.

Working with a BSC that understands each facility's unique needs and challenges can help organizations meet their cleanliness goals. Facility managers should look for a cleaning service provider that:

◆ **Uses sustainable chemicals:** According to the Environmental Working Group (EWG), 53% of cleaning products they've assessed contain ingredients that can harm the lungs. Twenty-two percent of cleaning products contain chemicals that cause healthy individuals to develop asthma.<sup>20</sup> Cleaning providers should thoroughly vet cleaning chemicals and choose solutions that don't release VOCs into the air. Some BSCs are further pushing the boundaries around cleaning by using innovative electrochemically-activated solutions (ECAS) made with just three ingredients – water, salt and electricity. ECAS are available as a cleaner and disinfectant and are created through the use of on-site generation (OSG) systems housed in a building's custodial closet.

These solutions are just as effective at killing bacteria and fungi and inactivating viruses compared to traditional chemicals. However, they come with the added benefits of being non-irritating to eyes and skin, disposal and drain friendly and fragrance and dye free. By refilling plastic bottles using the OSG system, facilities can greatly reduce the amount of plastic waste they generate through cleaning and eliminate reliance on potentially hazardous chemicals. Plus, ECAS are always available and facilities can ramp up production in the event of an outbreak, eliminating worry that staff will run out of cleaners or disinfectants when they are needed most.

◆ **Adopts high-tech equipment:** Cleaning service providers should use the most advanced and well-maintained equipment possible. Working with outdated equipment can negatively impact cleaning results as well as sustainability goals. Additionally, when equipment does not function at peak performance, it can influence the productivity of cleaning professionals and the quality of clean.

Using high-tech equipment, like robotic floor care machines, can enhance cleaning performance while enabling staff to focus on other high-priority tasks that support occupant wellbeing. Today, there are even floor scrubbers available that utilize technology to electrically convert water into a cleaning solution. These systems can minimize water, energy and conventional chemical consumption. Inquire with service providers about the equipment they use and their performance testing processes. Ask about anticipated decibel levels and how their technologies will impact IAQ, cleanliness and cleaning staff.

◆ **Conducts ongoing training:** The cleaning process is continually evolving as new pathogenic threats, technologies and tools emerge. Thus, it's critical to find a service provider that conducts ongoing training with its staff and in-house cleaning teams its employees work with. A dedication to staying up to date on best practices gives facility managers peace of mind that employees understand the most current cleaning procedures and can help guarantee cleaning performance is consistent within a building or across multiple locations. Determine whether the BSC sets a minimum number of hours of training for employees to complete annually, and how they approach training both new and veteran in-house cleaning staff.

◆ **Offers leadership development:** If training is fundamental to proper cleaning, leadership development is key to securing buy-in from cleaning professionals. Look for a cleaning service provider that invests in the future success of its employees through leadership development. Leadership development provides a higher level of education that increases employee ownership, morale, efficiency, safety, cleaning quality and sustainability. Growing and developing teams is essential to providing the best clean possible and to reducing turnover among cleaning teams, both at the managerial and entry levels.

◆ **Endorses or provides environmentally sourced consumables:** Commercial buildings and their occupants can create a lot of waste over the course of just one day. After all, the very nature of consumables like restroom products is that they are used once and then disposed of. This is why selecting sustainable consumables is so important. Using and providing products such as soap and paper products that align with progressive environmental standards can contribute to a better and more sustainable clean. Talk with service providers about how they source consumables to get a better feel for their preferences and their commitment to reducing the environmental impact of cleaning and maintenance.



## ◆ V. Preventing and Reducing Illness among Employees

### Tips for a Safer Workplace

Cleaning plays a key role in preventing the spread of pathogens throughout facilities, but it's also important for organizations to consider other ways to curb cases of illness. For example, employers can encourage employees to stay home when they're feeling sick or may be at risk of becoming sick. Perhaps an employee has fallen ill with COVID-19 or thinks they may have been exposed to someone who is COVID-19 positive.

Management should have sick or potentially sick employees follow CDC and local department of health recommendations. Depending on the industry, some employers may be able to implement flexible work options so sick or exposed employees can work from home without putting others at risk.

Another consideration for preventing and reducing transmission among employees is to implement protective measures in the workplace that best fit the outbreak at hand. Conducting daily health checks such as symptom and temperature screening can help signal when employees are displaying symptoms and mitigate the spread of illness. However, one difficulty with these screenings is that some people can be asymptomatic.

In the case of COVID-19, facilities should consider revising floor plans and adding protective barriers, installing floor markings to ensure employees are six feet apart from each other, creating a rotating schedule to limit the number of occupants in the building at one time and continuing to enforce a mask policy to reduce the risk of illness.

Finally, facilities can strategically place hand hygiene reminders near restroom entrances and exits, near sinks and at entryways where soap and sanitizer dispensers are installed. According to the CDC, proper handwashing is key to reducing<sup>21</sup>:

- ◆ The number of people who get sick with diarrhea by 23 – 40%
- ◆ Diarrheal illness in people with weakened immune systems by 58%
- ◆ Respiratory illnesses, like colds, in the general population by 16 – 21%
- ◆ Absenteeism due to gastrointestinal illness for school children by 29 – 57%



## **VI. Maintaining Employee Health is a Team Effort**

### **Executing a Thorough Cleaning Program**

While commercial offices have seen success with work-from-home policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers prefer a hybrid schedule that incorporates in-office work and remote work. Additionally, a large majority of businesses, like airports, retail stores, warehouses and convention centers, need their employees to be physically present in order to collaborate and effectively serve their customers. Cleaning will be indispensable for maintaining safe facilities, and the public's cleanliness expectations will continue to remain top of mind.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most facilities were simply "cleaning for appearance." As long as surfaces looked visually clean, people trusted that they were in fact clean and organizations were able to uphold their image. While maintaining brand reputation is still important, customers and employees now want reassurance that facilities are committed to the highest standards of cleanliness from both a health and environmental standpoint.

To ensure all building occupants and guests have access to clean and safe indoor environments, facility managers can partner with BSCs that understand the importance of cleanliness and prioritize the use of sustainable solutions to accomplish this. An effective cleaning program combined with additional safeguards against illness and recommendations for personal hygiene, whether it's through reminders to stay home when sick or wash hands regularly, is key to maintaining healthier environments for everyone.



For more information about GSF USA, visit [www.gsf-usa.com](http://www.gsf-usa.com) or contact us today.

*Founded in 1963, Group Services France (GSF) is an international cleaning solutions company providing commercial cleaning and support services for a wide variety of facilities spanning the globe. Based in France, GSF has international branches in England, Canada and the United States. GSF established U.S. operations in 1987. The U.S Corporate Headquarters and home office for the Indiana business is in Indianapolis, Ind. The home office for the Ohio business is in Cincinnati, Ohio and the home office for the Illinois business is in Des Plaines, Ill. Learn more at [www.gsf-usa.com](http://www.gsf-usa.com).*

11

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