

Cleaning for Health in the Classroom

Best Practices for Teachers

Some teachers choose to clean their classrooms in addition to what is already being done by custodial staff. Here's how to ensure those efforts tackle dirt and germs safely and effectively:

1. Teach good handwashing habits - the #1 way to keep germs from spreading.

Use plain soap and water for handwashing, and avoid antibacterial soap. No access to a sink? Use hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol: dye-free and fragrance-free). Note: hand sanitizers are not fully effective when hands are visibly dirty or greasy.

Handwashing at a sink with soap and water is always the best way to remove dirt and germs.

Cleaning for Health benefits all:

- Lowers absenteeism
- Increases productivity
- Improves indoor air quality
- Reduces asthma and allergy triggers

★ **Good to know:** Kids are more vulnerable to chemical exposures. Many common cleaning products have ingredients that can harm health, especially the lungs.

2. Know the difference between Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting. Use the right product for the task.

- **CLEANING** removes dirt and most germs. Use soap and water or a third-party certified all-purpose cleaner. **In the classroom, cleaning is the focus.**
- **SANITIZING** reduces germs to safe levels, for example in food service environments. At school, sanitizers are used in the cafeteria kitchen.
- **DISINFECTING** chemicals kill most germs, depending on the type of disinfectant, and only when used as directed.

In school, disinfectants and sanitizers are regularly used only in high-risk areas – nurse's office, bathrooms, cafeteria kitchens, and athletic facilities. Overuse does not provide any additional protection and can expose students and staff to harmful chemicals.

3. Rely on basic *cleaning* to remove dirt and germs in the classroom. A safe, effective cleaner can be as simple as adding a small amount of dish soap to a spray bottle with water.

★If students are helping out:

- They should use soap and water.
- Fragrance-free baby wipes could be used for quick cleaning.
- Most store-bought cleaning products are not safe for children to use.

Classroom All-Purpose Cleaner Recipe

1. Fill spray bottle with water.
2. Add 1 teaspoon of dish soap (fragrance-free recommended, avoid antibacterial).
3. Spray on surface, add elbow grease: wipe with paper towels or microfiber cloth.
4. Rinse and wipe dry to remove any residues.

Clean classroom surfaces, especially high-touch points like water fountains, sink and door handles. Microfiber cloths are versatile cleaning tools that can be used with all-purpose cleaner, dry, or dampened with water for cleaning surfaces.

4. Disinfecting is primarily the responsibility of school custodial staff. They have been trained to use disinfectants in a safe and effective manner.

Contact your custodian and school nurse if you think disinfecting is needed in your classroom.

★ **Students should never use disinfectants. Disinfectant wipes should not be used to clean hands.** This includes Clorox wipes.

5. **If you have an area rug in your room, vacuum it regularly with a HEPA filter vacuum to reduce asthma and allergy triggers.** If you don't have a HEPA vacuum, fine particles get dispersed in the air during vacuuming, so it's best to vacuum after students have left for the day. For extra dirt removal, flip the rug over and vacuum the underside too. Make sure the area under the rug does not get wet and promote mold growth.
6. **All body fluid spills like blood, vomit, feces, and urine must be cleaned up by custodial staff.** They are trained to deal with potentially infectious materials.

Cleaning for Health in the Classroom – FAQs

How does cleaning reduce germs?

Cleaning works by removing dirt and organic matter that contains and protects germs. Soap breaks down oils and allows dirt, contaminants, and germs to be more easily removed.

How does this guidance affect fall classroom supply request lists?

DO request, as needed:

- Baby wipes (fragrance-free) if a wipe product is needed.
- Paper towels (recycled content preferred).
- Hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol: fragrance-free, dye-free). If requested, hand sanitizer should be individual size.

DO NOT request:

- Disinfecting or antibacterial wipes.
- Non-alcohol based hand sanitizer.

What are the issues with disinfecting wipes?

- Disinfecting wipes (eg. Clorox, Lysol) usually contain “quats” (short for quaternary ammonium compounds) and fragrance chemicals. **These ingredients can trigger asthma** and are associated with adverse health effects.
- Disinfectants can give a **false sense of security to the user**, because when they are not used exactly to label instructions, they don't work properly. Most disinfecting wipes require the surface to remain visibly wet 4-10 minutes (dwell time) to be effective, requiring multiple wipes, and the surface must be cleaned prior for them to work effectively.
- **Disinfecting wipes are often overused**, meaning they are used for general cleaning when an all-purpose cleaner or soap and water would suffice.

Why is it important to use fragrance-free products in school?

Fragrance is one of the most frequently identified allergens, can irritate the respiratory system, and exacerbate asthma.

What's so great about microfiber cloths?

Their split fibers create more surface area and are superior for removing dust, dirt, and germs. They are reusable and can be laundered or washed by hand.

Why should teachers not bring common cleaning products (including bleach) from home into the classroom?

- One important reason is that some common cleaning products are dangerous when mixed. **Never mix bleach with ammonia, acids, or other disinfectants.** An example: Comet, containing bleach, would react with Windex, which contains ammonia, to form poisonous vapors.
- Common household cleaners and disinfectants may not be appropriate for schools and may cause allergic reactions or have other health impacts.

This guide is based on recommendations from the Washington State Department of Health. Funded through a grant from the Washington State Department of Ecology. While these materials were reviewed for grant consistency, this does not necessarily constitute endorsement by Ecology.

