

# Safe and Effective Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting in Early Child Care and Education

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Cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting are ways to help stop germs from spreading and making you sick. However, some cleaning products sold in stores may contain chemicals that can harm your health.

Children are more sensitive to the health effects of toxic chemicals that are in cleaners and disinfectants. This is because children are growing, and their organs are developing. Children should not use these products. Child care providers who are pregnant or planning to be should choose safer products and learn how to use them safely.

You can breathe in the chemicals in cleaning products and disinfectants. They can be absorbed through your skin. Many can cause asthma or trigger asthma symptoms. They can cause skin rashes, eye injuries or poisoning. They may cause long-term health effects.

## Safe cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting is important

It is important to choose the safest products available and to know when to clean, when to sanitize, and when to disinfect. **Do not disinfect something that only needs to be cleaned. Disinfectants are more toxic than cleaners.**

Some diseases, like colds, the flu and COVID-19, are spread through the air. Disinfecting surfaces will not stop their spread. **Handwashing is the most important thing you can do to stop the spread of these diseases. Soap and water are best.** Use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol when soap and water are not available. Opening windows for fresh air or using air cleaners can also help reduce the spread of germs.



## How to Clean, Sanitize and Disinfect

**Clean first to remove germs from surfaces.**

- Scrub with soap or detergent and water.
- Clean on a regular schedule.
- Clean before sanitizing or disinfecting. Sanitizers and disinfectants are less effective when there is dirt on a surface.

**Sanitize to reduce germs on surfaces or objects.**

- Regularly sanitize surfaces where food is served, stored or prepared.
- Regularly sanitize toys and pacifiers that children touch with their mouths.
- Choose sanitizing devices when possible to avoid using chemical sanitizers. Steam cleaners can sanitize floors and counters. Dishwashers can sanitize dishes and toys and pacifiers that children put in their mouths.

### Disinfect to kill germs on hard surfaces or objects.

- Disinfect equipment and surfaces that are used for toilets, putting on diapers or cleaning body fluids. These include diaper changing tables, bathroom sinks and toilets, and high-touch areas like doorknobs, bathroom faucets and drinking fountains.
- Use chemical-resistant gloves.
- Choose disinfectants with short contact times, or the time the product should stay on a surface for the disinfectant to work.
- Choose a disinfectant that does not require rinsing after use. If the product leaves a film, then rinse it off with water and a clean cloth after you use it.

### Use a microfiber cloth or mop for cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting.

- Microfiber is more absorbent than other materials and removes dirt and germs.
- When you are done using a microfiber cloth or mop, put it in the washing machine. Wash with other microfibers **only**, not with any other materials. Dry on low heat in the dryer, or hang dry.



### How to Choose Safer Products

Choose products certified by **Green Seal**, **Safer Choice**, or **Design for the Environment**. Products with these certifications have safer ingredients. Look for these logos:



If a product does not have one of these certification labels, choose a product that:

- Does not have the word “Danger” or “Warning” on the container.
- Is not an aerosol (a product that you spray, instead of applying with a cloth).
- Includes the list of ingredients.
- Does not have a strong chemical smell.

- Does not have fragrances or dyes (colors). Choose fragrance-free products over unscented ones. Fragrance-free typically means no chemicals were added to alter the product's smell. Unscented typically means a chemical was added to hide the smell.

Terms like “natural,” “eco-friendly,” and “green” are not reviewed or endorsed by the government. They do **not** mean the product is safer.

### Choosing safer cleaners

- Look for the Green Seal or Safer Choice logo.
- Choose a fragrance-free and dye-free product.

### Choosing safer sanitizers and disinfectants

- Choose a sanitizer or disinfectant with the Design for the Environment logo. If a product does not have the logo, look for safer active ingredients like hydrogen peroxide, citric acid, ethanol, lactic acid or isopropanol.
- Make sure the product you choose has an EPA registration number.
- Look for the word “Caution.” Avoid products with the words “Danger” or “Warning.”
- Make sure the product is approved for the surface you plan to use it on.
- Check that it has a short contact time (ideally 30 seconds to 1 minute).
- Make sure sanitizers are approved for food contact surfaces.
- **Avoid bleach and products with quaternary ammonium compounds (“quats”).** They can cause or worsen asthma. It is hard to dilute bleach properly if using a concentrated form.



## Where to Purchase Safer Products

**Distributors** are usually less expensive than retail stores like drugstores or grocery stores. Products come with a Safety Data Sheet (SDS) that includes helpful safety information and must be kept at the child care site. Informed Green Solutions has partnered with WB Mason to provide child care providers with safer products and discounted prices. Find out how to order products online from [Informed Green Solutions](https://www.informedgreensolutions.org).

**Retail products** are purchased from a store. Stores will likely carry some Green Seal, Safer Choice, and Design for the Environment products – remember to look for the logos!

**Learn more about safe cleaning products and practices at**  
[www.InformedGreenSolutions.org](https://www.InformedGreenSolutions.org).

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