

SURFACE CLEANING TO HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF “SWINE FLU”

The origin of the current pandemic is a new strain of the swine influenza virus (H1N1), which normally causes disease in pigs. The new version is spreading from person to person by the normal transmission routes associated with colds and seasonal influenza. Viral particles can enter the body via the respiratory tract and can also survive for certain periods on surfaces and on the skin. It is recognised that, while good hand hygiene is a primary means of helping to prevent the spread of swine flu, a regular and targeted regime of surface cleaning is also helpful.

Preventing the spread of swine flu

Guidelines have been issued by the Department of Health indicating that preventing the spread of germs is the single most effective way to slow the spread of diseases like swine flu. The guidance states that you can help protect yourself and your family by:

- ensuring everyone washes their hands regularly with soap and water,
- cleaning surfaces regularly.

And that you can prevent the virus spreading to others by:

- always carrying tissues,
- using tissues to cover your mouth and nose when you cough and sneeze,
- binning the used tissues as soon as possible, and
- washing your hands regularly.

An important way of avoiding becoming infected yourself, especially when out and about, is to avoid touching your nose, eyes or mouth with your hands

CATCH IT. BIN IT. KILL IT.

Why is cleaning surfaces important?

When somebody who has swine flu coughs or sneezes without covering their nose and mouth with a tissue, they can disperse droplets containing the virus into the air for up to one metre. This can spread the influenza to those nearby who breathe the spray and also cause droplets to fall onto surrounding surfaces. The infected person's hands can easily become contaminated during coughing and sneezing and they can then spread the virus onto surfaces that they might touch. The flu virus can live on a hard surface for up to 24 hours and a soft surface for about 20 minutes. If another person touches the surface within these times, they can pick-up viral particles onto their own hands. When touching their eyes, nose or mouth they may also become infected as the virus enters their body.

Following good hand hygiene practices by frequent washing and drying of the hands, or using hand sanitizers when appropriate, will reduce the hand contamination and is very

important in helping to prevent the spread of the disease. A cleaning regime aimed at reducing the concentration of the virus on surfaces which might be contaminated is also a sensible course of action.

Which surfaces need to be cleaned ?

The airborne spray from an infected person coughing or sneezing can fall on many different surfaces. We cannot tell which of these might become contaminated so a practical approach in general is to continue the normal cleaning regimes in the home, office and public places. However, as we know that the virus particles can also be spread by contaminated hands, we can at the same time pay special attention to the so-called “hand contact surfaces”. If we think of situations outside the home, examples would be the hand rails on public transport, stair handrails, lift buttons and door handles. Within the home examples would also include the handles of kitchen equipment, light switches, telephones and computer keyboards used by all the family.

If somebody is ill at home with suspected swine flu then you may want to take extra cleaning precautions. For example if they are ill in bed then clean their surroundings such as the bedside table more frequently than normal. Do not share eating utensils, crockery or linens with them until the items have been washed by the normal methods.

Outside the home, where many people are gathered together such as on public transport, it would be appropriate to review whether the frequency of cleaning should be increased.

What sort of products are available?

If you look along the shelves of a supermarket you will see numerous bottles, sprays and wipes in the “cleaning” section. Which ones should you choose?

Broadly these products fall into three categories and each has a role making surfaces hygienically clean.

Detergents and specialist cleaning products: These are cleaning chemicals that are used to remove grease, dirt and food remains. The manufacturers have not formulated these products to kill a wide range of micro-organisms, as is the case for a disinfectant, but there is a reduction in numbers by the very act of removing debris and rinsing with water. There are a wide range of products and the manufacturers will promote them on the basis of their cleaning power. Some are termed “heavy duty”, such as those used for cleaning floors and walls. They might be used neat or diluted according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

Disinfectants: These chemicals have been formulated to “reduce micro-organism to a safe level”. Products in this category are designed to be used on surfaces that are already free from grease and dirt, so it’s important to check that the surface is visibly clean first. It’s often best practice to clean with a detergent before using the disinfectant.

Sanitisers: These are two-in-one products that act as both a detergent and a disinfectant. Although the term “sanitiser” is well known in sectors such as the food industry, this name is not used very widely for products designed for use in the home. You may need to read the label carefully to find out if the product can both clean and disinfect. These sanitisers are frequently found in sprays or convenient wipes and are often intended for light-cleaning tasks with an added benefit of disinfection performance.

The disinfectants and sanitisers are already used widely in the home, particularly in bathrooms and in kitchens – where they have a role in killing the micro-organisms that can cause food poisoning. They can be used for the disinfection of a wide range of surfaces – but do check the label first to make sure the product is suitable for the surface you intend to use it on. Disinfectants and sanitisers may also have a specific “contact time” which is the time you need to wait for the product to act before wiping it off the surface. In fact some products don’t need to be wiped or rinsed off, which is very useful in situations where rinsing with water is not convenient – again read the label.

And don’t forget to disinfect the cleaning cloth if you are using a re-usable one. Dirty cloths not only spread dirt from one surface to another, but potentially spread micro-organisms as well.

Swine flu

Swine flu has proved to be a highly contagious disease. Thankfully, for the vast majority of people the symptoms are relatively mild, but a small number of people are at risk of becoming more seriously ill due to their age or the fact that they have under-lying serious health problems.

From winter 2010 – 2011 the government recommends that people in high-risk groups be vaccinated against H1N1 (swine flu). This includes all pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy.

Further information

- This factsheet forms part of a series produced by the Royal Society for Public Health. A factsheet on the role of good hand hygiene practices in reducing the spread of swine flu is also available from our website www.rsph.org.uk.
- Those concerned that they may have swine flu can obtain more information about flu symptoms from <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pandemic-flu/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- Advice from the International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (IFH) on preventing the spread of swine flu in the home and community can also be accessed at www.ifh-homehygiene.org
- Guidance and information on government strategy can also be found at the cabinet office website <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ukresilience/pandemicflu.aspx> (This is a snapshot taken on 25/11/2010)