

Health and Safety while Cleaning and Disinfecting for Coronavirus

For Custodians and Staff in Massachusetts Schools

You have the right to a healthy and safe workplace – the coronavirus outbreak does not change that right. Your employer is responsible for making sure that your job can be done in a healthy and safe way.

Risk of Coronavirus Exposure

Coronavirus primarily spreads in two ways:
1. An infected person sneezes, coughs on, or touches another person. The virus can linger in the air briefly after a sneeze.



2. When an infected person sneezes, coughs on, or touches a surface that another person later touches. Coronavirus can survive for up to 72 hours on smooth surfaces (metal, plastic) and up to 1 day on cardboard.

Risk of Chemical Exposure

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, schools may be disinfecting more surfaces more frequently. While increased disinfecting practices are a good idea, they should not put anyone's health at risk.



Intense chemical use can be an immediate or long-term health hazard for custodians or others in close proximity to chemicals.

If districts do not follow the correct safety protocol, the risk of unsafe chemical exposure can be greater than the risk of exposure to coronavirus itself.

Unless there is a known coronavirus outbreak in the building, schools should continue to clean and disinfect in the normal way that custodians are trained to do (the only change a school needs to make is to disinfect more surfaces than normal). Schools are responsible for ensuring ventilation while disinfecting and providing custodians the proper protective equipment needed for the job.

It can take 2-3 weeks for an infected person to have symptoms, so it is possible that an infected person was in the building without anyone knowing. The company should monitor the situation and inform you if it turns out that someone with coronavirus was in the building where you clean.

If there have been presumed or confirmed COVID-19 cases in the building, follow the guidelines for handling bodily fluids while cleaning. Assume that every surface may be infected, and remove gloves without letting the outside of the glove touch your skin. Avoid touching your face. Wash your hands after removing gloves.

More Information about Cleaning Practices and Health & Safety Protections

- **Clean then disinfect surfaces and objects that are touched often**, such as bathrooms, water coolers, desks, countertops, doorknobs, computer keyboards and other electronics, hands-on learning items, faucet handles, phones, and toys. Do this daily while the school is open after students and staff have left to reduce unnecessary exposure. If the school is closed, disinfect surfaces once the school has closed and students and other staff have left the building.
- **Check that your disinfectant** is on EPA's approved list for coronavirus, [List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2](#). This list is updated frequently. Ask the product manufacturer if you need more information.
- **If the school is using a new disinfectant or chemical, custodians must be trained** on the health and safety protocols for that chemical. The Safety Data Sheet (SDS) for each chemical must be available to all.
- **Use the proper concentration** of disinfectant and leave it on the surface for the required wet contact time. **NEVER mix ammonia and bleach** or use them together on the same surface – it creates deadly toxic fumes. Don't mix chemicals without reviewing the label and the SDS.
- **It is the school's responsibility** to provide gloves, goggles, and any other necessary protective equipment (PPE). Pay close attention to hazard warnings and instructions for PPE on the label or the SDS. The school must provide non-latex gloves for anyone with a latex allergy. Nitrile gloves are an ideal alternative.
- **Use the disinfectant in a well-ventilated space.** A respirator is not necessary in most cases. However, a poorly-ventilated space can lead to headaches, irritation in the eyes, throat, lungs, etc. **If you feel any health issue, stop working immediately and leave the room.** Your employer must protect your health on the job by providing a respirator and scheduling frequent breaks, adding a fan or other ventilation, or making other changes depending on the situation.
- **For a 5-gallon sprayer or other ways of spraying large quantities of disinfectant**, your employer must provide you with the proper PPE: gloves, apron, goggles, and likely a cartridge APR (air-purifying respirator) to protect your skin, eyes, and lungs. Using bleach in a 5-gal sprayer creates a serious hazard for those with asthma. If you must use bleach, follow the CDC's bleach dilution recipe of 1 ²/₃ cups of bleach to 5 gallons of water.
- **You have the right to refuse to do work that puts you at immediate risk** of serious physical harm. If instructed to do dangerous work without proper protections, you should refuse that task and ask for a different task. Then report the situation to the MA DLS and/or your union.
- **If your employer refuses to make the job safe, contact the MA Department of Labor Standards (DLS) confidentially** at safepublicworkplacemailbox@mass.gov or (508) 616-0461 ext. 9488. DLS enforces occupational health and safety rights for all public sector workers in MA. As of 2019, all MA public schools must follow OSHA standards.

