

Hand Sanitizing vs. Environmental Surface Sanitizing

The demand for hand sanitizers and environmental surface sanitizers and disinfectants has probably never been higher. This increased demand and tight supply has led many to look for a product that can be used to treat both environmental surfaces and bare hands.

We have had numerous requests both historically and recently for such a product and might be asked, for example, how well one of our hand sanitizers works to reduce microbes on food contact surfaces or if this EPA surface sanitizer can be used on both gloved and bare hands. The answer is that bare hand sanitizers and environmental surface sanitizers can not be used interchangeably.

Hand Sanitizers

Hand sanitizers are classified as drugs (topical antiseptics) and are regulated by the US FDA. They are typically formulated with skin conditioning agents to help prevent the drying and cracking of the skin that can result from repeated use. Hand sanitizers are not approved for reducing microorganisms on environmental surfaces. The CDC is currently recommending the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers (either ethanol or isopropanol) when soap and water is not available to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 but hand sanitizers do not make any claims against specific microorganisms including viruses like SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Environmental Surface Sanitizers

Environmental surface sanitizers and disinfectants are regulated by the US EPA and often do reference efficacy against specific microorganisms—bacteria, fungi and viruses. The labels of EPA-registered products list very specific directions for the proper dilution and contact time of surfaces to be treated. It is important to read and

follow the directions for use on the EPA label to achieve the desired reduction in the target organisms.

Even if a hand sanitizer and surface sanitizer seem to be the same, they are not and can not be used interchangeably. Some hand sanitizers and EPA-registered surface sanitizers/disinfectants both contain the same active ingredient.

Isopropyl alcohol (IPA) is a good example of an active ingredient that is used in both hand sanitizers and environmental surface treatments. However, they are regulated by two different governing bodies and are not formulated for or approved for the same uses. FDA-regulated IPA hand sanitizing compounds are formulated with skin conditioning agents that we do not necessarily want left on our environmental surfaces. EPA-registered surface sanitizing IPA sanitizers/disinfectants are harsher than hand sanitizers, do not contain any skin conditioning agents and will excessively dry out the hands.

Historically, some EPA-registered surface sanitizers and disinfectants did list directions for diluting solutions to be used as a bare hand dip. This, however, was something of an overstep of EPA products into FDA territory and the language was later removed from EPA labels.

We have several disinfectant products that meet the EPA's current criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2. Check our website for the most current offerings.

We always have to read and follow our EPA or FDA label directions for use to safely and effectively reduce microbes on our hands and our environmental surfaces.