Disinfecting Becomes Top Priority in the COVID-19 World

For many businesses before the COVID-19 outbreak, “disinfecting” was relegated to either the restrooms, the kitchen area in the breakroom, or assorted hand wash stations located around the factory floor or on the jobsite. Employees casually washed their hands and probably never gave this activity a second thought. Maintenance staff or cleaning service contractors might apply a sanitizer from time to time when tidying up these areas.

In the on-going struggle to contain the virus, however, disinfecting has a whole new meaning. This action will become as important, if not more so, than any other existing safety standard or protocol. And, unlike other safety procedures that may be used only occasionally or as needed, disinfecting never can take a day off; it must be done consistently and thoroughly each workday. Failing to do so could be catastrophic for a company in the event of an outbreak. The adverse publicity generated would damage its reputation, possibly trigger an OSHA investigation, degrade employee morale, and prompt general liability lawsuits, to name just a few potential complications.

What should employers do to implement a program that is truly effective? Harried and stressed with so many reopening operational problems to solve, some employers will simply hire a professional cleaning service to maintain their premises. Costs associated with this approach will vary of course and depend upon many variables (e.g. size of business, number of employees, scope of cleaning services …etc.).

Others may choose to implement an in-house cleaning program that meets the same objective. For employers who choose in-house disinfection, the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC) and the *World Health Organization* (WHO) offer guidance that may be relied upon to specify how and when to decontaminate but this option has its pitfalls too. Best practices change or are updated constantly, positioning even the most conscientious employers “behind the curve” on the most current recommendations.

Even so, an in-house program may be effective if employers develop a strategy then create an action plan. Some key components of the plan should include the following:

* Establish the cleaning scope for each location on the property (for example, reception area, factory floor, storage areas, break rooms…etc.). Not all of these may need the same type or frequency of cleaning. For example, a potentially high-traffic area like reception may have seating for vendors, customers, and the public, whereas individual workstations may have only one employee stationed there during the entire workday. The former may require more than one enhanced daily cleaning while the latter may only need one standard cleaning daily.
* Select proven disinfecting products then optimize their use based on need. For example, heavily trafficked and common areas may require fogging, extensive wiping down, and frequent deep cleaning of so-called “high touch” surfaces.
* Identify all areas on the premises that have human occupancy and where disinfection will be needed, including, but not limited, to the following:

1. **Restrooms-**soap/towel dispensers, toilet seats, sinks, light switches, doorknobs, and floors
2. **Workstations/Offices-**light switches, desk surfaces, chairs (and the floor area under the chair), keyboards, doorknobs, land-line type phones
3. **Common areas (**meeting rooms, reception, breakrooms, kitchens…etc.)-vending machines, countertops, refrigerators, microwave ovens, toasters, tables, doorknobs, sinks, land-line type phones
4. **Egress and Elevators-**stairway handrails, doorknobs, entry/exit doors, keypads, car buttons, railing, and floor

Employers now struggling to restart business operations and build momentum also inherit the burden of initiating new disinfecting protocols to ensure that their employees will have a “safe and healthful workplace” when they return. These must become an integral part of the company safety program, meaning that training must be developed and continuously updated so that employees understand the importance of sanitation in the COVID-19 world and its aftermath.

Even if the virus finally is suppressed, it is unlikely that the work environment will ever return to its former state. Too much is at stake to risk another outbreak by allowing sanitary practices to lapse and work environments to become contaminated so systematic disinfecting will be a vital component of any effective safety program, now and in the future.