



What Inadequate Cleaning & Sanitizing Could Cost Your Restaurant



Every restaurant wants to provide a safe, enjoyable, and delicious dining experience.

But in the hustle and bustle of daily service, one crucial element of service often falls by the wayside: **proper cleaning** and **sanitizing**.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), cleaning and sanitizing violations are among the most common issues health inspectors identify in restaurants nationwide.

Fortunately, they remain one of the most easily avoidable.

COMMON CLEANING AND SANITIZATION VIOLATIONS INCLUDE:

- Improper cleaning steps and processes
- Inadequate sanitizer concentration
- Improper storage of cleaning and sanitizing chemicals
- Improper use of wiping cloths
- Poorly functioning dish machines



In this guide, we'll break down **what health inspectors are looking for when it comes to cleanliness and sanitation**. We'll also explore areas where restaurants commonly fall short, including how failing to meet standards can lead to long-lasting (and costly) consequences.



And remember, violations don't just affect how you score on an inspection—they can also **impact your bottom line.**

What Health Inspectors Are Really Looking For

Cleaning and sanitization aren't the only things that health inspectors are looking for when they walk through your restaurant. However, they are perhaps the most important.

When health department officials visit your kitchen, it's their job to determine whether your restaurant is actively protecting guests and staff alike from harmful pathogens.

Here are a few basics they're hoping to cover²:

- Are surfaces and equipment being properly sanitized after coming into contact with food?
- Are all surfaces and equipment smooth and in good condition (i.e., not damaged or torn)?
- Are the right sanitizers being used?
- Are cleaning and sanitizing best practices being followed?

Falling short in any of these areas can result in demerits or even temporary closure orders.

² National Restaurant Association. (2023, September 11). Here's what health inspectors look for in your restaurant, and why.

Cleaning vs. Sanitizing: What's the Difference?

Many operators confuse sanitizing, cleaning, and disinfecting. Others might use these terms interchangeably. At first glance, these activities do seem similar—but they're quite different in terms of what they **actually** achieve.³

LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK:

CLEANING

Is the act of removing dirt, debris, crumbs, and, sometimes, germs from a surface or object. When you clean, you'll use soap or detergent and water to physically scrub down the object in question. This may not necessarily kill all of the germs present, even if it removes some of them.

SANITIZING

Means lowering the number of germs on a surface or an object to a safe level. Sanitizers, when used correctly, are designed to reduce pathogens to a safe level. This can be achieved by first cleaning and then sanitizing. For example, consider a cutting board. First, detergent and water must be used for cleaning. Then, a sanitizer solution is applied to reduce the germs to a safe level. This two-step process ensures effective sanitation.

DISINFECTING

Disinfecting involves using chemicals to kill nearly all germs on a surface. It doesn't clean dirt—that's what the cleaning step is for.

Disinfectants, such as bleach, require time to work on the surface. While most often used on non-food-contact surfaces, they can be used on food-contact surfaces only if extra steps are taken, such as rinsing and sanitizing, to remove any chemical residue.

So, cleaning alone is not enough to actually kill potentially harmful pathogens that could linger on surfaces, equipment, and other objects. It's best practice to combine cleaning with sanitizing to reduce germs to a safe level.



THAT'S WHY **SANITIZING** IS THE GOLD STANDARD IN FOODSERVICE, PARTICULARLY FOR FOOD-CONTACT SURFACES.

³ MedlinePlus. (2020, September). Cleaning, Disinfecting, and Sanitizing. National Library of Medicine.

Choosing a Sanitizer

An important part of compliance is using chemical sanitizers approved by your local health authority. Some commonly approved sanitizers include:

- Chlorine (bleach-based)
- Iodine
- Quaternary ammonium compounds (quats)

Each option has its advantages, but all require proper dilution and use to be effective. Applying too much, too little, or wiping the sanitizers away too soon can still leave harmful germs behind.



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QUICK TIPS

Safe Cleaning & Disinfecting

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| <p>1. Ensure that you properly clean before sanitizing. Always mix sanitizers with the amount of water listed on the instructions.</p> | <p>5. Do not mix cleaners, disinfectants, or any chemicals unless the labels say it is safe to do so.</p> |
| <p>2. Allow sanitizers to remain in contact with food-contact equipment or surfaces for 10 to 30 seconds before removing.</p> | <p>6. When necessary, wear personal protective equipment (PPE) like gloves.</p> |
| <p>3. Always store cleaning products in the containers they came in.</p> | <p>7. Be sure you and your team know what to do if someone swallows, inhales, or exposes their skin to a dangerous chemical.</p> |
| <p>4. Follow all instructions and warnings on the label of each product.</p> | |

Common Areas That Fail Inspections

Even restaurants with the best intentions can miss the same cleaning trouble spots time and time again. Some of these "hotspots" are easy to miss, but are also especially likely to get flagged by inspectors.



HOTSPOT	POTENTIAL RISKS	PASS/FAIL
Cutting boards	Grooves may harbor bacteria, even after washing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Slicers	May be difficult to disassemble and sanitize thoroughly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Soda fountain nozzles	Often forgotten, but also an easy breeding ground for mold	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ice machines	Can harbor mold, yeast, and bacteria	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restrooms	Dirty restrooms can create hazards and doubt about kitchen cleanliness	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vent hoods and grease traps	Can pose a fire and contamination risk if ignored	<input type="checkbox"/>



Where You're Probably Missing the Mark

Some areas where bacteria thrive aren't obvious, even to the most diligent staff members. They might provide a home to harmful pathogens, even if they don't get flagged by a health inspector. Being aware of these areas can help keep your entire establishment safe and clean.

TOP OVERLOOKED AREAS

Be sure that your staff is aware of commonly overlooked cleaning zones, such as:



Backs of handles and faucet knots.

These are touched often, but rarely scrubbed thoroughly.



Blender gaskets.

Because they're hard to reach, these might get neglected during cleaning, but they're also constantly exposed to food.



Walk-in cooler door handles.

These are high-touch areas prone to contamination.



Can openers.

Hard-to-clean hinges and dull blades alike can trap food particles and harbor bacteria.



POS systems and touchscreen devices.

Once again, while these are touched often, they're rarely disinfected.



The Real Cost of Getting it Wrong

It may be easy to fall short when it comes to cleaning and sanitizing, but the consequences are not so easy to bounce back from.

HEALTH VIOLATIONS

Health departments may issue fines if cleaning and sanitation issues are found during an inspection. In most places, you'll have to pay a penalty, but the amount you pay will depend on the severity of the violation as well as your location.

Fines can worsen with repeat offenses, too. A first-time cleanliness infraction may cost about \$100 to \$500 in fines, while repeat and major food safety risks can incur penalties in the thousands. Repeat violations generally lead to more severe consequences, including temporary closures or license revocations.

Aside from financial costs, health violations can also harm your reputation and potentially lead to guest illness.

EMPLOYEE MORALE

When cleaning isn't seen as a priority or is treated as an afterthought, staff may feel inclined to follow suit. They may even feel undervalued while working in what they perceive as a dirty or unsafe space. All of this can lead to high turnover, poor performance, and increased training costs.

CUSTOMER TRUST & REPUTATION

A "dirty" environment is one of the top reasons guests leave negative reviews—it's often a top complaint on sites like Yelp.



\$100
-TO-
\$500

**FINE FOR FIRST-TIME
CLEANLINESS INFRACTION**

Customers want to trust that they can safely enjoy a meal in your facility, so bad reviews can hurt your reputation and your bottom line.

A single photo or social media post of dirty kitchens or bathrooms can go viral within hours. Rebuilding trust is difficult, if not impossible, once it's been eroded.

Especially in a post-COVID world, cleanliness has become non-negotiable. According to the second installment of The New Normal for Restaurants study, released in 2021, **sanitation now ranks higher than cost** when it comes to what customers care about most.⁵

⁴ Chang, K. (2013). How reputation creates loyalty in the restaurant sector. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management 25(4):536-557.

⁵ Pope, Rachel. (2021, March 9). Press Release: Recent Study Reveals that Restaurants' Sanitation Standards Now Influence Consumer Purchase Behavior More Than Price of Menu Items. Simon-Kucher & Partners.

POTENTIAL FOODBORNE ILLNESS OUTBREAKS

Many foodborne pathogens are invisible to the naked eye. They can survive on surfaces for hours or even days. Without proper sanitization, they can easily make their way into your guests' meals, leading to illness, potential legal costs, closures, and more.

The cost of a single restaurant-associated foodborne illness **outbreak can range dramatically from several thousand dollars to over \$1 million**, depending on the type of restaurant.



REPUTATION IS HARD TO SANITIZE

One 2013 study on corporate reputation and customer loyalty in the restaurant sector found that **trust and perceived value were the biggest drivers of reputation**.⁴ In other words, if customer trust goes down, so does corporate reputation and, ultimately, revenue. Cleanliness is a basic customer expectation, and failing to meet it can be seen as a betrayal of trust.

Building a Culture of Clean

Avoiding the risks that come with inadequate cleaning and sanitization requires more than being able to react quickly. It also means being proactive—that is, minimizing the risk of cleaning and sanitizing issues in the first place. By fostering a larger culture of cleanliness within your establishment, you can shift gears from trying to avoid routine errors to reducing the chances they occur altogether.

But how can you go about building such a culture?

SHIFTING TEAM MINDSETS FROM “CHORE” TO “CRITICAL”

For cleanliness to become a part of your culture, it can't be seen as an inconvenience or an optional activity. It should be viewed as an integral part of what makes your restaurant successful, just like quality food or great service. Leadership must set the tone by treating cleaning and sanitizing as essential.



ENCOURAGING ACCOUNTABILITY |

To truly promote accountability for cleanliness, leaders should also be sure to set clear expectations. Here are a few pointers that can help:

- Create and use shift checklists to assign responsibility for certain tasks and ensure they get completed.
- Schedule routine walk-throughs to identify any gaps in compliance.
- Track consistency in cleanliness and celebrate successes to further reinforce your expectations.

REINFORCING STANDARDS |

Keep the good habits going by consistently showing your team that they're doing things right. To do that, leadership might consider ways to:

- Regularly review cleaning duties, such as hosting pre-shift huddles.
- Provide and collect ongoing feedback, particularly if standards aren't met.
- Reward employees who consistently go above and beyond.





Stay Inspection-Ready With Proper Cleaning & Sanitization Training

Ultimately, cleaning and sanitizing are some of the top offenders when it comes to health and food safety risks. That's because even restaurants that try to maintain good habits can overlook key contamination hotspots or areas where bacteria tend to thrive. It can also be challenging to enforce cleaning and sanitizing standards across all employees, especially without clear expectations.

The best way to keep your restaurant prepared for potential inspections and food safety risks at all times is to ensure that your employees are food handler trained. They should also be up to date on food safety best practices, including the right way to clean, sanitize, or disinfect each area of their workspace.

When everyone knows what to do to play their part in a culture of clean, you can keep your kitchen free from harmful pathogens—and your restaurant safe from health violations—no matter how busy things get.

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