



You Asked About...

Environmentally Responsible Janitorial Services

You may think your workplace is clean...but is it healthy? And is it green?

Cleaning is supposed to create liveable and healthy indoor environments, however, this is not always the case. Some cleaning products and improper procedures can pose a risk both to human health and the environment. If you are interested in learning more, read this fact sheet.

The Cleaning Concern

According to the Northeast Assistance & Pollution Prevention News (Spring, 2007) approximately one third of commercial cleaning products contain harmful chemicals that are linked to cancer, reproductive disorders, respiratory ailments, or skin and major organ damage. Cleaning products can result in occupational hazards; it is estimated that six out of 100 janitors are injured each year. Injuries include serious burns to the eyes or skin (20%) and other effects from chemical fumes (12%). Cleaning products can also affect indoor air quality.

In addition to human health effects, the chemicals in cleaning products can harm the quality of water resources and aquatic and terrestrial life. Some cleaning chemicals are not biodegradable and can accumulate in the environment. Cleaning chemicals may act as endocrine disruptors that mimic growth and behavioral hormones causing subtle and dramatic effects, especially in aquatic organisms. Organisms are exposed to these substances when they are washed down drains and when they are released during manufacturing, mixing, and packaging of the cleaning solutions. According to a 2002 United States Geological Survey study, 69% of streams sampled contained persistent detergent metabolites and 66% contained disinfectants.

Cleaning procedures are also important. For instance, using more chemicals or cleaners than are required to do the job wastes resources and can cause undue harm.

Disposable wipes and other disposable cleaning tools create unnecessary solid waste. Using disinfectants unnecessarily is another concern (see below).

Avoiding Harmful Cleaning Products

So how can you avoid cleaning products and procedures that are harmful to human health and the environment? Where possible select environmentally preferable cleaning products and janitorial services. Environmentally preferable products and services are those which have a reduced effect on human health and the environment over their full life cycle when compared with competing products and services.

Do environmentally certified products work?

In many cases, certified products work better than traditional products. To attain certification, the products must meet strict performance standards as well as environmental standards.

Do certified products cost more?

You may pay an additional 10% more - a small charge for the added human health and environmental protection.

Cleaning Products

An easy way to ensure that you are purchasing and using environmentally preferable cleaners is to look for the EcoLogo or Green Seal logos. These programs certify products and services that have been rigorously tested to ensure they meet science-based environmental standards. Certified products are available in local stores (for example, in sanitation or janitorial supply stores and in the organic section of Atlantic Superstore and Sobeys stores). By choosing third party certified products, you can avoid products with misleading or incomplete environmental claims.

EcoLogo Program

EcoLogo Program, was established by Environment Canada in 1988 to help purchasers identify products and services that are less harmful to the environment. Products must undergo rigorous testing to ensure that they meet strict environmental standards before they can be certified. To identify EcoLogo certified products look for the EcoLogo (three stylized doves intertwined to form a maple leaf) on the product label.



Green Seal

Green Seal, a not for profit organization in the United States, was founded in 1989. It certifies products and services based on science-based environmental standards. Standards are based on a life-cycle approach to ensure that all significant environmental impacts of a product are considered, from raw materials extraction, to manufacturing, to use and disposal. To identify Green Seal certified products look for the Green Seal logo on the product label.



Cleaning Procedures

Follow directions on the label of cleaning products, sanitizers, and disinfectants. Use sanitizers / disinfectants only when necessary and be sure to use them properly (clean the surface prior to sanitizing / disinfecting; leave product on surface for required time; rinse to remove residue). Use re-useable cleaning tools instead of disposable wipes. Consider using micro fibre materials for cleaning, dusting and mopping. Micro fibre material has exceptional cleaning capability due to the structure of the material (very fine thread woven into loops creating microscopic spaces to trap dirt, dust, and bacteria). Consider ways to conserve water and energy.

Disinfectants: Are They Beneficial or Harmful?

Are we safer if we use disinfectants and other antimicrobial products? No, not always. Many experts say that disinfectants and antimicrobial solutions are over-used.

Disinfectants (including disinfectants and sanitizers and other antimicrobial products) are effective in killing microbes, some of which may be harmful to human health, but:

- disinfectants are toxic by their very nature;
- disinfectants can result in resistant bacteria; and,
- disinfectants can kill good bacteria as well as bad bacteria.

The Nova Scotia Department of Health says that the best way to control the spread of infectious diseases is to wash hands with soap and warm water. The bacteria may not be dead but they are washed down the drain where they are not in contact with humans. This is generally true for hard surfaces as well; cleaning with a detergent and rinsing removes the vast majority of bacteria (for additionally effectiveness, use micro fibre material). Sanitizing (significantly reducing the numbers of microorganisms present) should only be used in areas of increased risk of human contact with harmful microorganisms. Disinfectants (destroying pathogenic and potentially pathogenic microorganisms on surfaces and objects) should only be used in very high risk areas; the specific purpose of the disinfectant must be considered. Do not use a combined cleaner/disinfectant as a multipurpose cleaner.

Government Taking Action

NSEL has adopted Environmental Specifications for Janitorial Services under the Environmentally Responsible Procurement Policy. Building managers will be asked to voluntarily comply with the specifications. NSEL is currently working with the Department of Transportation and Public Works to include environmental specifications in tenders for janitorial services of office space in government owned and operated buildings. The specifications will be included in lease agreements for office space at a later date.



Environment and Labour

This publication has been developed to support the Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour's Pollution Prevention Plan and the goals of the government-wide sustainable procurement initiative.

