

How to Clean and Sanitize Your Laundry to Help Prevent the Spread of Pathogens at Home

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Laundry chores are a fact of life. From emptying the clothes hamper to sorting, washing, drying, (maybe ironing), and storing clothes and linens for later use, these chores comprise a seemingly endless cycle of mind-numbing activities. But researchers tell us there is good reason to give laundry some careful thought.

Why Sanitize Laundry?

Did you know that pathogens can be spread through the laundry? This is especially a problem when someone in your household is sick. Associate professor of environmental health Dr. Kelly Reynolds of the University of Arizona was quoted in a [Time Health article](#) as saying a single gram of fecal matter from a sick family member can contain millions of viruses, “and exposure to just a hundred of those viruses can make you sick.” By way of background (and possibly more than you wanted to know), the average person has about one-tenth of a gram of fecal residue in his underwear, according to Dr. Reynold’s colleague, professor of microbiology, Dr. Chuck Gerba. So, it’s safe to say fecal matter is getting into your washer.



Dr. Reynolds notes “one germy item in the washer will spread to 90% of other items.” You might think hot water will kill those pathogens. Think again: “When it comes to molds that cause skin or respiratory infections, or organisms that cause colds, flu and stomach flu, most of them will survive the wash cycle,” says Dr. Reynolds. Adding disinfectant however, such as chlorine bleach, to the wash cycle will go a long way toward destroying pathogens in laundry.

Drying Laundry: A Key Step in Preventing the Spread of Pathogens

In addition to adding a disinfectant to the wash cycle, the heat of the dryer can also help sanitize your laundry. A 2007 [study](#) by Dr. Gerba and another colleague at the University of Arizona concluded the most important factors for reducing viruses in laundry are passage through a drying cycle and the addition of chlorine bleach. At least 28 minutes of the “high heat” dryer setting is quite effective against viruses in laundry. *Beware of energy efficient, low-heat settings, notes Dr. Reynolds, as these may not help sanitize.* If you don’t have a dryer, hanging laundry outside in direct sunlight can be a good option as the *ultraviolet light of the sun has disinfecting properties.* Old school, but solar-powered!

Laundry Sanitizing Tips

The [Clorox website](#) recommends using $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of chlorine bleach for a regular size load of bleachable laundry with an average soil level, and 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of chlorine bleach for an extra-large or heavily soiled load. Always check fabric laundering instructions before using bleach products. *Some fabrics, including spandex, wool, silk, and mohair, should not be treated with chlorine bleach*, according to a recent [Washington Post article](#) on using bleach correctly. In some cases, oxygen bleach (sometimes called “color-safe bleach”) may be a good alternative. Check bleach laundry symbols found on fabric labels (see the key at right). When in doubt, it is possible to check whether it is safe to use bleach on colored fabrics. Add 2 teaspoons of regular bleach to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water and apply a drop to a hidden part of the item. Wait 1 minute, and then rinse and blot dry. If there is no color change, the item may be safely laundered with bleach.

Consumers are advised not to overload washers, permitting items to circulate or tumble freely through the wash water. It’s better to divide a large load in half and run two loads than to cram a washer full of fabrics. And don’t forget to [wash your hands](#) after loading the washer.

Even washing machines need sanitizing, especially if someone in your household is sick. If your washer does not have a “clean-out cycle,” which is run when the machine is empty, you can follow this procedure, based on the [Clorox website](#) recommendations:

1. Use hot water
2. Select the “extra rinse” option
3. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup regular bleach (6% strength) to the bleach dispenser (or fill the bleach dispenser to the “max-fill” line)
4. Run the cycle
5. Be sure to run an extra rinse cycle to ensure no bleach is left behind

Hampers and laundry baskets can also be sanitized regularly with surface disinfecting wipes; again, this is particularly important when someone in your family is ill.

Laundry can be a tedious chore. Armed with the right information, however, you can develop a few healthy habits to help keep your laundry clean and sanitized and help prevent the spread of pathogens at home.

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