

Cleaning and Disinfecting Against Coronavirus: Are We Doing It Right?

*By the Water Quality & Health Council
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In a nutshell...

A new U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey shows some consumers are misusing cleaners and disinfectants in their efforts to avoid COVID-19 (coronavirus). This practice can cause injury and may have led to an increase in calls to U.S. Poison Control Centers in the first quarter of 2020. Consumers are advised to read and follow manufacturers' directions when using household cleaners and disinfectants.

A new [survey](#) from the CDC offers a peek at several high-risk practices that some consumers have adopted in an attempt to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. The survey was prompted by an [April 2020 CDC report](#) that phone calls to U.S. Poison Control Centers increased an average of about 18% in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same periods in 2018 and 2019. CDC suggested, [and we agreed](#), that the timing of the uptick in calls to poison control centers supports a *potential* link between coronavirus-related cleaning and disinfecting and product misuse.

Cleaning and Disinfecting Product Misuse

The survey found 39% of the 502 respondents admitted to using household cleaners and disinfectants in nonrecommended, potentially dangerous ways. These include:

- Applying bleach to food, such as fruits and vegetables (19%)
- Using household cleaning and disinfecting products on the hands or skin (18%)
- Misting the body with a cleaning or disinfecting spray (10%)
- Intentionally inhaling vapors from household cleaners or disinfectants (6%)
- Drinking or gargling diluted bleach solutions, soapy water, and other cleaning and disinfectant solutions (4%)

These unsafe uses can result in “severe tissue damage and corrosive injury and should be strictly avoided,” notes CDC. The statistics bear this out: Survey respondents who reported engaging in at least one high-risk practice more frequently reported an adverse health effect than those who did not report engaging in these practices. Additionally, 25% of respondents reported at least one adverse health effect during the previous month that they believed had resulted from using cleaners or disinfectants.



Household chlorine bleach solutions can be used safely to disinfect surfaces against the COVID-19 virus, according to the CDC. Poster directions are available for download [here](#).

Unsafe Preparation of Cleaning and Disinfecting Solutions

Many consumers remain uninformed about properly preparing solutions for cleaning and disinfecting, which is reflected in the percentages of survey respondents who agree with the following true statements about chlorine bleach:

- Only room temperature water should be used to prepare dilute bleach solutions (23%)
- Bleach should not be mixed with vinegar (35%)
- Bleach should not be mixed with ammonia (58%)

Survey respondents have a better understanding of safe use and storage of cleaners and disinfectants, as shown by the percentages that agree with these true statements:

- Eye protection is recommended for use of some cleaners and disinfectants (64%)
- Gloves are recommended for use with cleaners and disinfectants (71%)
- Hand washing is recommended after using cleaners and disinfectants (68%)
- Adequate ventilation is recommended when using cleaners and disinfectants (73%)
- Cleaners and disinfectants should be kept out of the reach of children (79%)
- Hand sanitizers should be kept out of the reach of children (54%)

Tips for Safely Cleaning and Disinfecting Surfaces

[CDC concluded in the survey report](#), “COVID-19 prevention messages should continue to emphasize evidence-based, safe practices such as frequent hand hygiene and frequent cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces.” Safe practices include reading and following label instructions, using water at room temperature when diluting products, avoiding mixing chemical products, wearing skin and eye protection and ensuring adequate ventilation when using these products, and storing and using chemicals and hand sanitizers out of the reach of children and pets.

Sometimes directions can be eye-opening, such as when we discover there’s a need to [keep a given surface wet with a disinfectant for several minutes](#) for it to be effective. Good to know!

When cleaning and disinfecting surfaces to help prevent the spread of coronavirus, let us “first do no harm” to ourselves and our families by inventing our own potentially risky methods. You can’t go wrong by simply following the directions.

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