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KNOWLEDGE SERIES

What level of cleaning is required  
in an office / commercial  
premises to safeguard against  
outbreaks of infection

## Can cleaning protocols give staff confidence to return to offices?

On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic and, overnight, businesses and workplaces abruptly closed their doors, for what many believed would be just a few weeks.

As it turned out, that was optimistic, but unrealistic. Over a year later and, across the UK, we're only just seeing staff previously based in offices being encouraged to return. As many employees brace themselves for resuming the daily commute, employers also need to be preparing themselves and, in particular, their working spaces.

It's important not to forget that, from the very start of the pandemic, workplaces have been recognised as one of the most susceptible to COVID-19 infections. According to a BBC investigation, Public Health England figures showed Covid-19 outbreaks in the second half of 2020 were higher in offices "than in supermarkets, warehouses, cafes, restaurants, and construction sites combined".

These findings are in line with a report published by the Institute of Employment Rights (IER) earlier this year,<sup>1</sup> which found that 40% of people testing positive for COVID-19 reported prior 'workplace or education' activity, meaning that workplace infections account for a significant proportion of all COVID-19 cases.

This period has shown that employees can be productive working from home, so the office space is now gearing up to serve more to facilitate conversation, inspiration and learning than it is to enable deep work. With this new emphasis, the cleaning challenges posed by these commercial settings, with their multiple touchpoints, communal areas and meeting spaces, need specific attention.

The onus is on employers to take legal responsibility for the health and safety of their teams. With this in mind, preparing the office for workers to return should be a process that demonstrates to employees that appropriate hygiene protocols are in place, which provides reassurance that they are returning to work safely.

**In this article, we outline the steps you should take before inviting your employees back to the office.**

<sup>1</sup> 'HSE and Covid at work: a case of regulatory failure'  
[www.ier.org.uk/product/hse-and-covid-at-work-a-case-of-regulatory-failure](http://www.ier.org.uk/product/hse-and-covid-at-work-a-case-of-regulatory-failure)



01

## Workplace assessment

Facilities Management and housekeeping teams should be consulting Government guidance around the general principles of cleaning and disinfection during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

A cleaning audit should be undertaken prior to staff return. This will establish which surfaces are frequently touched, such as door handles, phones or keyboards, and high traffic, communal areas such as bathrooms and kitchens, as viruses (including the SARS-CoV-2 virus) can transfer from people to surfaces and then be passed on to others. A protocol can then be designed and implemented to effectively clean and disinfect these areas.

The illustrations show common touch points in offices that need to be identified for regular attention. We have also assigned levels of risk according to the frequency that they are likely to be touched. For example, hot



desks, where more than one person will occupy a single workstation during a working week, will further increase the risk of transference of pathogens if appropriate hygiene measures are not put in place. The illustrations should only be used as a guide. To ensure maximum efficacy the approach should be designed around the environment informed by the types of surfaces, their location and the frequency with which they are contacted.



Indicates a high risk of frequent contact and transmission of pathogens to surface



Indicates a medium risk of frequent contact and transmission of pathogens to surface



Indicates a low risk of frequent contact and transmission of pathogens to surface



85% of businesses have found that their cleaning practices have been required to improve<sup>3</sup>



<sup>2</sup> GOV.UK / <sup>3</sup> Robert Scott

## 02

## What level of cleaning is required in an office?

COVID-19 is spread by small droplets in the air. Once settled on surrounding surfaces the risk of residual infectious virus is considerably higher in a 48 hour period.<sup>4</sup> The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends the consideration of frequently cleaning and disinfecting objects and surfaces that are touched regularly.<sup>5</sup>

A combined product that cleans and disinfects in one step has been used effectively across the NHS in infection prevention and control processes for many years now including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Highly versatile, they can be used to clean and disinfect floors and surfaces, providing greater efficiencies by only requiring single application.

A hospital-grade biocidal chemical formulation used in combination with a compatible surfactant can achieve high level disinfection. This greater level of protection will help people return to offices safely and help maintain protection against microorganisms that can lead to viral infection when implemented as part of suitable infection prevention and control practices.

<sup>4</sup> Guidance COVID-19: Cleaning in non-healthcare settings outside the home, updated 19th July 2021, UK Health Security Agency.

<sup>5</sup> Cleaning the workplace, Cleaning, hygiene and handwashing to reduce Coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, hse.gov.uk, 30th September 2021



If a separate surfactant and antimicrobial are used they may not be compatible. In this case, if traces of the surfactant remain on the surface, it can reduce the efficacy of the antimicrobial and also potentially create residues on the surface. This may result in the surface remaining a risk for transmission of dangerous pathogens.

In addition to greater reliability, a one step process reduces the risk to staff, helps prevent cross contamination of cleaning products when using more than one product and saves valuable cleaning time and disruption to operations leading to cost efficiency.

When selecting a hospital-grade, one-step cleaning and disinfection product, it is important to check the EN standards to which it has been certified. These will indicate the range of pathogens (including viruses) against which it has been tested and approved according to a particular method of application and area of use. The general standards to look out for include: EN 13624, EN 13727, EN 14348, EN 14476, EN 16615, EN 1276, EN 13697, EN 13704 and EN 1650.

03

## Protecting your employees' welfare

Having appropriate cleaning practices in place will go a long way in helping people to return with confidence. Many employees have concerns about going back to the office, supporting them through this transition will demonstrate how they are valued.

Reassurance can be provided through greater visibility of cleaning, knowledge of products used, and communications with staff – perhaps through wall charts explaining cleaning procedures, for instance.

The training of all staff in new protocols will be critical in ensuring a swift and successful transition. Not only will this increase their understanding and appreciation but ease their fears. It is important to remember that adherence to sound practices will dramatically reduce the emergence of diseases such as COVID-19.

In the case of a COVID-19 outbreak, the Government recommend the use of a combined detergent disinfectant solution at a dilution of 1,000 parts per million available chlorine (ppm av.cl.).<sup>6</sup>

To ensure that the office environment is free from the risk and threat of disease it is important that a disinfectant capable of killing dangerous pathogens such as the SARS-CoV-2 virus is used. Only then can desired peace of mind be achieved for everyone using the office environment.

Ultimately this is not about putting short-term measures in place, this is a new, holistic approach to hygiene that will help to protect your team and the wider community.

<sup>6</sup> COVID-19: Cleaning in non-healthcare settings outside of the home, updated July 2021, UK Health Security Agency.

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