

What is the Difference Between a Disinfectant, Sanitizer, and a Cleaner?

It is important to understand the difference between surface disinfectants, sanitizers, and cleaners especially for prevention of infection within healthcare settings. Products used to kill viruses, fungi, and bacteria on surfaces are registered as antimicrobial pesticides by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). “Sanitizers and disinfectants are two types of antimicrobial pesticides”¹

Understanding the differences:

- **Disinfectants:** Subject to more rigorous EPA testing requirements; have higher-level efficacy claims than sanitizers¹; used to destroy or irreversibly inactivate infectious fungi, virus, and bacteria but not necessarily bacterial spores.²
- **Sanitizers:** Used to reduce, but not necessarily eliminate, microorganisms from the inanimate environment to levels considered appropriate as determined by public health codes or regulations²; “there are no sanitizer only products with approved virus claims”.¹
- **Note:** some products are registered with the EPA as both a disinfectant and sanitizer because they have been tested using both standards. “These products are eligible to be included on EPA List N because of their disinfectant claim.”¹
- **Cleaners:** Cleaners in healthcare remove foreign material (e.g., soil, and organic material) from objects. Cleaners do not have organism kill claims.³

Misleading or false claims

As the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting availability of EPA registered surface disinfectants, products with misleading or false claims may be offered as substitute agents for disinfection of healthcare facilities. “EPA is authorized to take enforcement action to prevent the sale or distribution of disinfectants with false or misleading claims on their labeling”.⁴ In addition, the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) prohibits the sale or distribution of pesticides that are unregistered or misbranded.⁴

Disinfectants Recommended for Use Against SARS-CoV-2

EPA registered disinfectants are recommended for use against SARS-CoV-2. Users should confirm that the product is included on EPA’s List N before use. Healthcare facilities should ensure that the product being used is appropriate for the level of cleaning, sanitizing, or disinfecting that is needed based on environmental surface/equipment and risk of infection transmission.

For more information, refer to cited references below:

¹<https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/whats-difference-between-products-disinfect-sanitize-and-clean-surfaces>

²<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/what-are-antimicrobial-pesticides>

³<https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/disinfection/cleaning.html>

⁴<https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/will-epa-take-enforcement-action-against-companies-making-false-claims-their>

