

THE HYGIENE CONCEPT

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This paper aims at defining the concept of hygiene as it relates to general cleaning practices, and clarifying its broad meaning across the different cultures and contexts, with special focus on household setting.

Definitions

Hygiene: is the practice through which people maintain or promote good health. Making themselves and their surroundings clean, cleaning and - when needed - disinfecting surfaces, hands, units, surroundings and items of personal use in order to break the chain of infection contribute to hygiene. Other measures of hygiene are for instance keeping a certain distance to ill people.

Cleaning: is the mechanical or chemical removal of dirt and soil from the human body, an object or an area. Normally, cleaning with soap or detergent followed by rinsing with water is adequate to remove visible dirt and allergens. By removing dirt the number of germs will be considerably reduced. Hence, cleaning is a major step towards hygiene.

Disinfection: in situations where there is high risk of transmission of germs (e.g. when there is someone who is infected or is vulnerable to infection), the targeted use of a disinfectant helps prevent infections. Disinfectants are products that contain or generate biocidal active substances with antimicrobial properties and that communicate this function to end users. These products prevent the spread of infection by inactivating/killing harmful organisms.

Everyday life hygiene

Hygiene, both inside and outside the house, is an essential aspect of our daily lives. Over recent centuries, major advances in the availability of, and our understanding of the need for, hygiene tools and practices have resulted in quantum leaps in general health and life expectancy.

It is common to refer to “hygienic practices” as the measures that have to be implemented to ensure wellbeing and good health. These practices include a high number of actions, which are all important to reach the final objective, and which vary depending on the mode of action and on the subjects involved.


For example we all know that the first standard hygiene practice, before eating, is to wash your hands with soap and water. However, this may not be sufficient if we have been dealing with infected persons; in this case it may be more appropriate to disinfect your hands to prevent getting sick yourself.

This is what "targeted hygiene" means; to identify the areas and the situations that could lead to a risk, and to implement adequate hygiene measures, where and when indicated, to reduce exposure to harmful microorganisms.

This involves recognizing that there are situations where hygiene can be achieved with products that remove dirt and along with it a sufficient part of the pathogenic microbe /contaminant load¹, and others where it is appropriate to use disinfectant products and practices that ensure a greater reduction of harmful microorganisms.

Conclusion

Good cleaning practices, targeted in the places and at the times that matter, are of vital importance in maintaining acceptable levels of hygiene. The ultimate aim of hygiene is to break the chain of infection. Disinfection plays a role in this approach but is not always a necessary requirement.



¹ Soaps, detergents and simple cleaning products, with subsequent rinsing in clean water, can often adequately decontaminate hands, utensils and other sites from microbes simply by physical removal.