

Facility Maintenance

Combat Germs in the Gym

By Peter J. Sheldon Sr.

With an estimated 25 to 50 million flu cases reported in the United States each year, a facility manager's job becomes extremely difficult around the time the flu season starts. As a gym owner, manager or operator, you know that gyms are breeding places for germs. People sweat on shared equipment like machines, dumbbells and benches, and simply placing a towel over the equipment is effective only to a point. But short of ordering your members to wash their hands every two minutes, what can facility managers do to combat these rampant, often dangerous, germs?

In addition to the regular flu, the nation is in the throes of an H1N1 outbreak that leading health experts predict could affect as much as 50 percent of the population over the fall and winter. According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), up to 20 percent of the entire U.S. population is afflicted with flu-associated illness annually, causing around 200,000 hospitalizations and as many as 36,000 annual deaths. These staggering numbers put extra pressure on facility managers, but a few simple steps could actually help them contribute to the solution (instead of the problem).

Promoting cleanliness is one conscientious way to quell the spread of germs. But do you really know how effective and in-depth your cleaning service or internal staff are? It's important to evaluate the most cutting-edge cleaning methods and technologies before you can really trust in the cleanliness of your gym.

Combating Flu Proactively

We all know that the responsibility for proactive health begins with managers and ultimately falls to customers. The responsibility on the facility manager's side is to educate customers on how they can contribute to the general health and welfare of other gym customers. Even if health measures appear to be common sense, gyms should find ways to advertise these policies. For instance, hanging a sign with health tips in the locker room can be an effective strategy for putting the right information out there.

While they may seem like common-sense suggestions, the following tips must be communicated to customers in one way or another:

- Bring your own water bottles. Drinking fountains are cesspools for germs.
- Try not to touch eyes, nose or mouth—germs spread in this manner.
- Wipe off machines with disinfecting/sanitizing wipes before and after using equipment.
- Following a workout, you should wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Bring your own exercise/yoga mat, and wipe it down after each use with a damp cloth.
- Always wear flip-flops in the shower.
- Never store damp or wet workout clothes in your locker or gym bag.

- Hang your gym bag on a hook in the locker room. Putting your gym bag on the floor may result in your picking up bacterial matter. A study of handbags by Dr. Charles Gerba of the University of Arizona found up to 100 million bacteria per square inch on some bags—the result of being placed on floors including those in public restrooms.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- Don't share towels.
- Bring your own soap if you plan on showering.
- If you are ill with the flu, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends you stay home from work, school and the gym, and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

Health-Based Cleaning Stresses Thoroughness

Even cleanliness has a new angle in the 21st century. Sure, you might see your staff or cleaning crew getting a rag, mop or cloth on every piece of equipment in the building, but are their cleaning methods truly effective? If they're not leveraging the right cleaning methods or technology, how do you know that they're actually preventing the spread of the flu virus?

The fact is that a lot of today's practiced cleaning methods don't hold true to new developments in the science of cleaning. Some outdated cleaning strategies that work based on "spray-and-wipe" techniques might kill germs—but a lot of those techniques end up spreading the dead germs, offering a rich food source to new organisms.

Scientifically developed, health-based strategies and technologies actually dig through the dirt to help eliminate all traces of germs, pathogens and other microbes. Usually, a health-based cleaning company leverages hospital-grade virucide/germicide disinfectants that kill harmful pathogenic organisms invisible to the naked eye. Color-coding strategies for avoiding cleaning tool cross-contamination are also regular components of a health-based cleaning strategy.

Leveraging the right technology is another important piece of the health-based cleaning puzzle. Compared to traditional cleaning tools, microfiber-equipped cloths and mops are 99 percent more effective at soil and matter retention. For improved soil removal and further cross-contamination elimination, health-based cleaning strategies usually include lightweight flat mops with super-absorbent microfiber fabric to trap and contain dead germs. State-of-the-art spray and vacuum, wet cleaning technology for locker rooms, showers and toilets provide cleaning results so effective they can meet food contact standards.

By now, you're probably wondering about your cleaning service and if they've got the tools and knowledge to really get the job done. It's important to ask yourself a series of questions in order to really evaluate your cleaning service:

- Are cleaning processes designed for soil/matter containment and removal?
- Are perfumes or other odors—whether attractive or noxious—still present following the cleaning process? (They shouldn't be.)
- Are cleaning crews using hospital-grade disinfectants?
- Does your service use microfiber technology throughout the cleaning process?
- Are cleaning crews using high-efficiency, multi-filtration vacuums to improve indoor air quality?
- Are hard-surfaced floors being cleaned with color-coded, microfiber flat mops with a single dip method for eliminating mop water contamination?
- Are personnel washing hands properly and changing gloves frequently?
- Are "no-touch" spray and vacuum systems being employed in showers and restroom areas whenever possible?

With these things in mind, make sure to keep yourself and your facility prepared throughout the flu season. The healthier you keep your customers, the better the chance you'll see them on a regular basis.

Peter J. Sheldon Sr., CBSE, brings over 18 years of experience in the building services contracting industry to his position as vice president of operations of Coverall Health-Based Cleaning System. Sheldon works closely with the Coverall sales and operations teams to spearhead initiatives that further the company's strategic objectives and help develop the most efficient and innovative cleaning processes available. For more information, visit www.coverall.com.

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