

Health and Hygiene at Work

Whether it's a dirty kitchen, overflowing trash, or germ-ridden equipment, poor workplace hygiene is an everyday health risk for you and your team. And, if you don't tackle the problem straight away, chances are it will only get worse.

But personal hygiene at work is a delicate subject, and encouraging people to change their behavior can be tricky. This article explains how to do it with the minimum of fuss, and without causing offense!



The impact of poor hygiene at work

People spread germs in countless ways, from sneezing without a tissue to leaving coffee cups unwashed. And shared facilities and equipment can soon harbor high levels of harmful bacteria.

When these behaviors and dangers go unchecked, they can have serious implications for your organization.

One consequence is that people get sick, stop working, and take time off to recover. But your business can suffer even more when people who are sick continue to work and end up spreading germs around the office, instead of taking the proper amount of sick leave that they need. This is called "**presenteeism**" and it costs companies more than \$150 billion a year in the US alone. [1]

Research also shows that poor standards of hygiene reduce people's ability to focus on their work, and trigger a negative mindset. This can affect productivity and morale. [2]

A dirty or untidy office puts off potential clients and hires, too. People gain an instant insight into your workplace culture when they step into your premises, and bad first impressions do nobody any favors.

9 ways to combat unhealthy workspaces

In many organizations, daily cleaning and regular "deep cleans" are carried out by contracted cleaners. But this doesn't mean that hygiene is someone else's problem.

Maintaining a healthy workplace is everyone's responsibility – and it's basic **good manners!** But it doesn't have to be hard work, and it doesn't mean that you have to spend a fortune on hygiene consultancies, or replace all of your fixtures and fittings. It means inspiring people to change their habits for the common good.

Here are nine simple measures that you can take to encourage this:

1. Know the law

Part of your **duty of care** as a manager is to maintain a safe physical work environment, and to ensure compliance with industry standards and statutory regulations.

Baseline standards of hygiene are regulated by the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) in the US, by the [Health & Safety Executive](#) in the UK, and by similar bodies in other countries.

Make sure that you know the standards required in your country, and who is directly responsible for implementing them in your organization. They're your first port of call if you think these standards aren't being met.

In the instance of an **epidemic or global pandemic**, governments may require businesses to take special measures to ensure the outbreak is contained. These may include enforced working from home, putting people on furlough, or even closing offices.

These situations can often be fast-moving, so keep on top of things by regularly checking government advice, as well as updates from your national or local health service, and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO). And – crucially – keep your staff informed of any changes.

2. Set expectations

Maintaining a clean and hygienic workplace is a team effort. So, make sure all your people understand what's expected of them.

First, clearly identify the behaviors you want to see. These could include everyone sanitizing their shared keyboards at the end of each day, for example, washing hands regularly, or taking turns to load the dishwasher.

Share these expectations in team meetings or company updates, and include them in your staff handbook, so that new hires know what to expect.

3. Make it easy

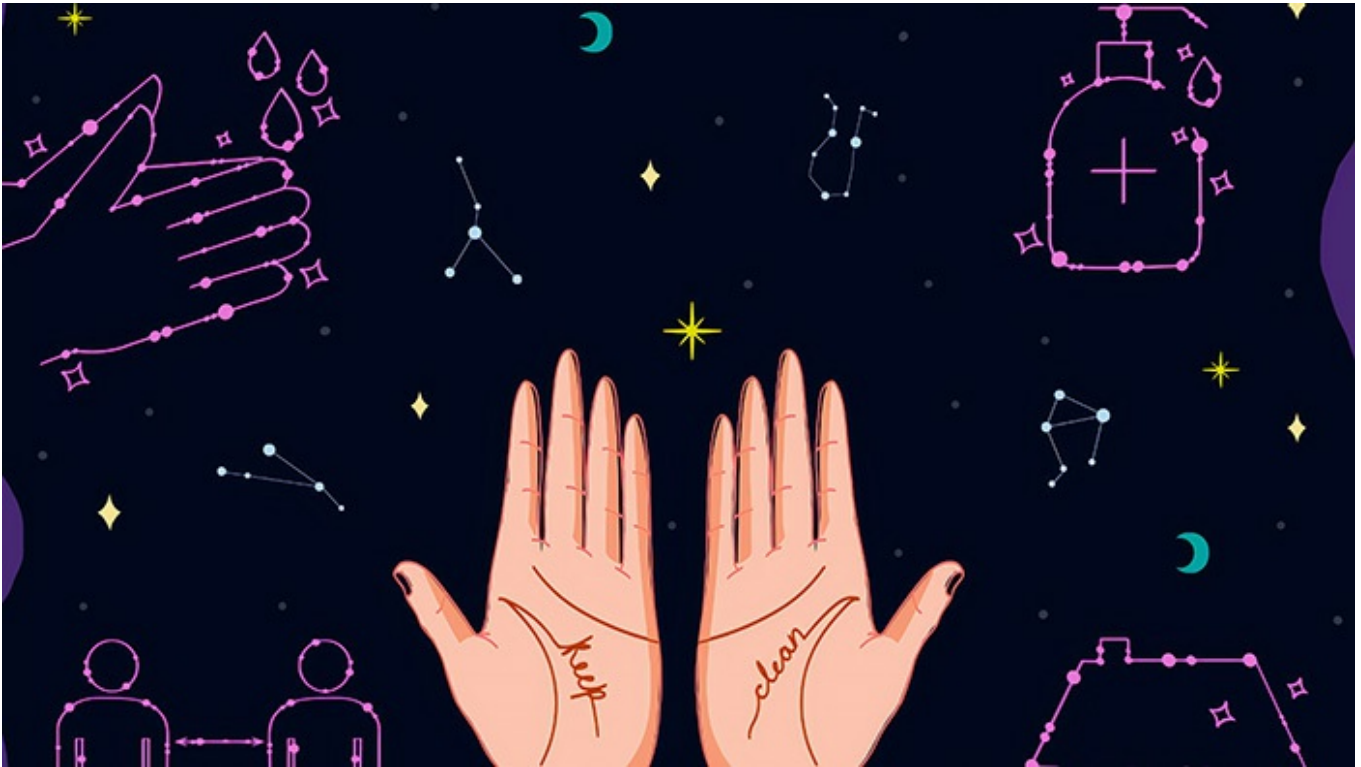
Laziness or laissez-faire attitudes toward cleanliness can be hard to break. So, make it easy for people to form good hygiene habits.

Focus your efforts in these key areas:

- Office furniture and equipment. Put tissues (for catching sneezes), hand sanitizer

- and antibacterial wipes on all desks – and make sure that people use them.
- Desks, door handles, telephones, computer keyboards, printer buttons, water dispenser levers, and even coffee pots should all be cleaned regularly.
 - Fridges. Throw out any uneaten food each week to prevent mold and bacteria from developing.
 - Microwaves. Encourage people to clean them after every use. Germs need food and warmth to spread, and the office microwave can be a prime breeding ground.
 - Soap dispensers. Check that soap dispensers are always topped up and encourage people to wash their hands regularly and thoroughly.

Bring the message home, by displaying educational posters on handwashing and tidying up at key locations, such as the kitchen or toilet.



In 2020, the worldwide spread of coronavirus prompted many businesses to clamp down on specific office hygiene practices to help contain the spread of the virus.

Good hygiene practice (particularly in times of viral outbreaks) includes:

- Washing your hands with soap when you enter and exit work, and before you eat. If soap is not available, use an alcohol-based sanitizer.
- Washing your hands for 20 seconds or more. See the handy WHO guide [here](#).
- Catching your sneezes and coughs in a tissue, which you should dispose of immediately. Or, if a tissue is not available, cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Maintain social distancing. This means maintaining a distance of at least one meter (three feet) between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing.

4. Explain your reasons

People tend to engage more with objectives when they fully understand the reasons behind them.

Linking high standards of hygiene to your organization's key aims can help to get the message across. For example, you could explain that **working from home** is acceptable if you feel unwell to stop the spread of illness in the office.

Explaining negative consequences can be equally effective. It ought to be obvious to everyone that a bag strap sticking out from under a desk can be a trip hazard, for instance, but not everyone will be aware that norovirus (the "winter vomiting bug") can survive for several days or even weeks on hard surfaces. Pointing out dangers like this can encourage people to keep their environment clean and tidy.

5. Use 'nudge power'

Strict hygiene policies, and penalties for failing to observe them, may backfire if they make people feel patronized or 'policed'. You can avoid this, and still achieve good results, by "nudging" them in the right direction instead.

You can harness "**nudge power**" by setting up visual prompts. You might, for example, paint 'footsteps' on the ground, to lead people toward the recycling area. Or put up step-by-step guides on handwashing next to sinks and in toilets.

One of the most famous and successful hygiene-related nudges was the image of a housefly painted onto urinals in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, to improve users' aim!

6. Don't avoid difficult conversations

Ask any manager to list their most awkward topics of conversation with team members, and personal hygiene issues will likely be near the top. But a problem like this most likely won't go away on its own – the person in question may not even be aware of it.

Take care to avoid a nagging or hectoring tone when you broach the subject. The person might feel deeply embarrassed or offended by your accusations, or they might "dig their heels in" and resolve not to change.

If you treat them with **tact and consideration** instead, their responses will likely be more positive and collaborative.

You may find this framework useful for sensitive conversations:

- **Find a private space to talk.** This shows that you care about the person's feelings.
- **Be direct, but not hurtful.** Name the problem – don't "dance" around it.
- **Give an example.** For instance, "Last week, you were seen taking a cookie from the jar immediately after coughing into your hand."
- **Give a reason why it's a problem.** For example, "This is an obvious health hazard, as well as being unpleasant to witness."
- **Give the person an opportunity to respond.** Gently ask, "Do you understand the concern?"

Discuss solutions. In many cases, the solution will be obvious. In our example, above, the person just needs to use tissues and wash their hands. But if the problem is more complex, do what you can to help them to find a solution.

Be aware that when you raise a personal hygiene issue with a co-worker, you may get a response that you didn't expect. There may be cultural factors to consider, for example. Stress, anxiety and other medical conditions can also be the cause of personal hygiene issues.

7. Take lunch breaks away from your desk

Encourage your people to eat in designated areas, away from their desks. Workstations are a favorite home for germs, which feed on the crumbs that we drop. If people do need to eat at their desks, make it a policy that they clean up properly when they've finished.

Bear in mind that getting away from your workstation at lunchtime can be a good way to combat stress and **increase your fitness**, too.

8. Avoid presenteeism

Be clear that people should go home when they're sick. Lead by example, and don't be an illness "hero" - you'll be spreading germs when you should be resting.

Put **remote working procedures** in place, if you don't already have them. This will make it easier for people to work from home if they have a minor but infectious ailment.

9. Clean together

Arranging regular cleaning sessions with your team can encourage everyone to take pride in their workplace - although you may have to overcome some initial resistance to the idea.

Try setting aside 15 minutes each week for everyone to do some light cleaning together, such as tidying away books or files, wiping down surfaces and equipment in shared areas, or sanitizing their workstations.

This is also a simple and effective team-building activity. For the best results, make sure that everybody takes part - including the managers!

Key points

Dirty, unhygienic workspaces can cause stress and illness, reduce productivity and morale in your team, and damage your organization's reputation.

Overcoming these problems requires behavior change and buy-in from your people. There are nine ways to encourage this:

1. Know the law.
2. Set expectations.
3. Make it easy.
4. Explain your reasons.
5. Use "nudge power."
6. Don't avoid difficult conversations.
7. Take lunch breaks away from your desk.
8. Avoid presenteeism.
9. Clean together.

Take care to tackle hygiene issues with tact and sensitivity, particularly when a specific individual's behavior needs attention.

[1] Paul Hemp, 'Presenteeism: At Work - But Out of It' (2004). Available at: <https://hbr.org/2004/10/presenteeism-at-work-but-out-of-it> (accessed 6 June 2020)

[2] Libby Sander, 'The Case for Finally Cleaning Your Desk' (2019). Available at: <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-case-for-finally-cleaning-your-desk> (accessed 6 June 2020)