

# Sustainability Desk by Renae Hesselink - Does your cleaning program reduce exposure?

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## Sustainability Desk

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According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), every day in our country 40,000 people miss school or work due to asthma: 30,000 people have an asthma attack; 5,000 people visit the emergency room due to asthma; 1,000 people are admitted to the hospital due to asthma and 11 people die from asthma. Asthma affects 22 million Americans and costs nearly \$18 billion annually. For adults, it is the fourth leading cause of work absenteeism and “presenteeism,” i.e., working while ill, resulting in nearly 15 million missed or less productive workdays each year. Among children ages five to 17, asthma is the leading cause of school absences from a chronic illness. It accounts for an annual loss of more than 14 million school days per year, approximately eight days for each student with asthma, and more hospitalizations than any other childhood disease. It is estimated that children with asthma spend nearly eight million days per

year restricted to bed.

A 2003 survey conducted by the Michigan Department of Community Health determined that more than 230,000 children and 700,000 adults in Michigan at that time had asthma. Annually, this disease costs Michigan approximately \$224 million in direct medical expenses alone, and an additional \$170 million in indirect costs according to AAFA research. Our state has recognized asthma as a major issue and devoted resources to develop a 44-page strategic plan, “Asthma in Michigan 2010: A Blueprint for Action” for the purpose of improving asthma treatment and self-management ([http://www.getastmahelp.org/AIM\\_Strategic\\_Plan6'06.pdf](http://www.getastmahelp.org/AIM_Strategic_Plan6'06.pdf)).

An estimated 15 percent of all adult asthma cases in the U.S. can be traced to the workplace. Incidences include new cases caused by exposures at work, as well as asthma made worse by conditions at work, including exposure to cleaning products.

Has this convinced you yet of the importance of taking action to reduce or even eliminate asthma triggers whenever and wherever possible?

The introduction of a Green Cleaning Policy and High Performance Cleaning Program in a LEED building is intended to reduce the exposure of building occupants and maintenance personnel to potentially hazardous chemical, biological and particulate contaminants which can adversely affect air quality, human health, building finishes, building systems and the overall environment.

Safer products are readily available through all of the major manufacturers of commercial cleaners. For example, Green Seal GS-37 certified products do not contain ingredients that cause or trigger asthma attacks. Disinfectants are now under greater scrutiny, and we will soon see the EPA's Design for the Environment label on products in this category that meet the higher standards for health and safety.

Good cleaning practices also contribute to reduced exposures for cleaning crews and building occupants. The use of microfiber technologies for dusting or mopping capture dirt and dust and remove contaminants from surfaces as well as the air. Using vacuums certified by the Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) ensure that the proper filtration systems are in place to remove soils and dust particles. CRI certification also guarantees that the chamber that contains the bag is well-sealed to prevent dust from escaping.

Practicing safe cleaning methods is equally critical. Never mix different cleaning products together; never use a chemical at full strength when the instructions say to dilute it; work with as much ventilation as possible; avoid spray products and aerosols (applying the cleaning agent using cloth may also reduce the amount needed); use personal protective equipment such as goggles and gloves; and pay attention to warning labels and Material Safety Data Sheets. Avoid overuse of disinfectants unless absolutely required or necessary. Using disinfectants on high touch-points combined with the proper contact time, cleaning methods and tools will help reduce exposure. Disinfectants are not typically cleaners, so cleaning the surface first is always recommended.

Finally, the perception persists that green cleaning products cost more. Depending on your cleaning practices these expenses can be reduced by limiting or even eliminating the use of cleaners in some cases.

If we approach building cleaning holistically with the health of our occupants in mind, including the custodial team, we can promote improved health, achieve significant cost savings, and reap the considerable benefits inherent in green cleaning products and practices.

The U.S. Green Building Council is a coalition of leaders from across the building industry working to promote environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live and work. The West Michigan Chapter provides and develops leadership through affiliations and

education at all levels. Please send comments and column proposals to [chuck.otto1@gmail.com](mailto:chuck.otto1@gmail.com).

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