

Infection Control in Children Soft Play and Other Play Venues

Soft play is great fun for children and helps them develop skills like balance, coordination and socialising while burning off energy in a safe environment. However, as the surfaces in soft play areas are touched by lots of children, they can become contaminated with microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses. Many microbes don't cause any serious illness, but it's important that ball pits and other soft play equipment are effectively cleaned. This will help to prevent high levels of potentially harmful microbes spreading between children, parents and staff.

One of the microbes which can cause outbreaks of illness in soft play establishments is norovirus, sometimes called 'winter vomiting disease'. Norovirus is highly infective and able to spread from person to person. It can survive on surfaces for many days and be picked up by anyone touching the contaminated surfaces. Symptoms include the sudden onset of nausea followed by projectile vomiting and watery diarrhoea. As the symptoms begin around 12 to 48 hours after encountering the virus it is possible that some of the customers and/or staff in the safe play area may have the virus but not the symptoms.

While sometimes referred to as 'winter vomiting disease' the risk of infection applies all year round.

How can you prevent an outbreak of infectious disease

Hand washing

Unfortunately, hand sanitisers and jells are not effective at killing Noro virus which makes good hand washing vital in preventing outbreaks of illness. It is important that hands are washed correctly with warm water. Liquid soap is best as bar soap can become contaminated, as any germs from the previous users stay on the soap. For the same reason nail brushes should not be used. Once washed hands should be dried with disposable paper towels or under a hot air drier.

Customers should be encouraged to wash their hands when coming into the soft play area.

Cleaning

General areas -

- PVC fabrics and surfaces should be washed down with detergent solution.
- Slides and PVC surfaces intended to be slippery should also be washed with a detergent solution and sprayed with anti-static silicone based polish.
- All areas should be kept dust and litter free. Regular cleaning of all parts (accessible or otherwise) of the area should be undertaken.
- Particular care should be taken to ensure that catering and adjacent areas are regularly cleaned and that food and drinks are not allowed into the main frame.

As Norovirus can contaminate and remain on the surfaces of the soft play equipment a cleaning schedule/regime should be put in place. Documenting the cleaning schedule is good practice.

First, determine which surfaces are the high contact surfaces (frequently touched) and which are lower contact surfaces.

Decide how often each of these surfaces should be cleaned in your setting.

Decide which cleaning product/s you should use. It is vital that any cleaning chemical is able to reduce bacteria and viruses to safe levels. You should also seek guidance from the manufacturers of your play equipment on the best chemical to use. In general surfaces will need to be cleaned with a detergent to remove general dirt followed by a disinfectant that can remove microbes.

All contact surfaces should be cleaned in line with your cleaning schedule

In practice, PVC fabrics should be washed with a detergent solution followed by a viricidal chemical. Ensure the chemical is effective against norovirus and remains on the surface for the contact time. This is the amount of time that the product needs to stay 'wet' on the surface. The contact time will differ between chemicals but if it's not left on the surface for the stated time the chemical will not be effective, you will be wasting your money and putting customers at risk of illness. When choosing a chemical make sure that the contact time is realistic for your setting.

Ball pools should be cleaned regularly by removing the balls into a washable net bag and washing with detergent solution. The balls should then be immersed in a disinfectant able to reduce norovirus, the balls should remain submerged in the disinfectant solution for the correct contact time.

The ball pool frame should be vacuumed to remove dust and dirt and cleaned in line with other PVC fabrics. The balls should be inspected and any damaged ones discarded before replacing. Both the balls and the ball pool should be allowed to air dry before use. To prevent down time due to cleaning it is recommended that a second set of balls is provided. There are also companies able to offer ball cleaning services. When employing a cleaning company, you should ask for assurance that the chemicals they use are able to reduce norovirus.

It is important that loose/mobile items are not missed from the cleaning schedule. These should be identified in a check sheet to ensure they are included in each cleaning process.

The cleaning equipment used such as cloths and buckets must be kept separate from any other cleaning equipment. Providing a different colour for cloths and buckets will ensure they aren't accidentally used in the wrong area. All cleaning equipment must be kept clean and replaced regularly. Single use cleaning cloths are recommended as this is the best way to prevent re-contamination of surfaces.

Any soiled items, including any that have been placed in a child's mouth, should be removed and isolated while they await cleaning. Any machine washable items must be washed at 60°C. Staff dealing with grossly soiled items should wear appropriate PPE while dealing with the item.

In addition to all areas should be kept free of litter and dust that could attract and or/ hide pests. A regular inspection of all areas should be undertaken daily.

Food

Any food available on the site should be in a separate area with easy to access hand washing facilities available with signage encouraging hand washing before handling food.

Staff training

RoSPA recommends that all staff are trained in procedures for dealing with local soiling and relevant cleaning materials should be available in a secure storage location

It's easy to assume that cleaning is a simple task that can be given to anyone. However, cleaning in soft play settings is vital to keeping the customers and staff safe so it must be effective. All staff given the task of cleaning must be trained to clean in a way that will remove microbes and prevent re-contamination. A written cleaning schedule will show the items to be cleaned, the frequency, who is responsible, the chemical(s) and equipment to be used and instructions on how to clean the area/item. Recording the schedule will make it easier to train and monitor staff.

Site rules

Making customers aware of your site rules will assist your control of infectious disease. Such rules can aid cleaning and reduce contamination. If the rules are written it can also help empower staff should they need to correct inappropriate behaviour. Examples could include the following.

House rules

It is important that symptomatic staff, visitors and contractors should be discouraged from visiting until 48h symptom-free.

Hand washing with liquid soap and warm running water and paper towels on entry

Remove shoes when in the soft play area

No food on the soft play structures (a separate area should be provided for eating)

Standard for Indoor Play Areas

Annexe D of BS 8409, is the British Standard Code of practice for Indoor Play Areas. All Indoor Play Area operators are advised to make sure that they have a copy of the standard.

If you need further advice, please contact your local Environmental Health department and UK Health & Safety Agency.

Specific Equipment

Operators should follow manufacturer's guidelines for all equipment

Ball pools

Main points include:

Local soiling - evacuate and close ball pool, remove and clean affected balls, Unless prompt action is taken to deal with the soiling this can become widespread and require the prolonged closure and complete emptying of the ball pool.

The provision of a clean "spare" set of balls means that shut down time due to ball cleaning can be kept to a minimum

Routine cleaning- should be undertaken when ball pool is closed, remove all balls and place in net bags, wash in water containing a detergent solution, immerse in a solution of sanitizer, drain and allow to air dry fully, clean base and sides and dry, inspect before replacing.

Deep cleaning – should be scheduled at reasonable intervals. There are numerous companies who undertake ball pool cleaning.

Frequency of clean - There is no dedicated frequency of clean. This is down to manufacturer's instructions and a common sense approach by the operator. High use areas will require a greater frequency of cleaning

This isn't part of the leaflet but I thought the others may be interested in the

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) [Ball pool cleaning - RoSPA](#)

[What the NHS says about children's ball pits and risk of serious disease from them - North Wales Live \(dailypost.co.uk\)](#)

[Indoor Play Areas For Children Operational Guidance For Soft Play Equipment - The Play Inspection Company \(playinspections.co.uk\)](#)

[Norovirus: What to do if you catch it and helping to stop the spread - UK Health Security Agency \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

[Guidelines for the management of norovirus outbreaks in acute and community health and social care settings \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[Norovirus Toolkit for Schools and Nurseries \(4\).pdf](#)

[Viral gastroenteritis/Norovirus \(infectionpreventioncontrol.co.uk\)](#) – source of the info on dilution of chemicals