

COVID-19: Maintaining Clean, Hygienic Hydrothermal Spa Areas

Unsurprisingly, we've had a lot of clients getting in touch to refamiliarize themselves with the best cleaning, disinfectant and sterilization processes for their home and commercial wellness areas – whether it's a sauna, steam room or shower.

However, what might be surprising is the fact that some of the most important aspects of maintaining good hygiene really starts during the design and build process. Because these areas, with their extensive use of heat and moisture, are ideal environments for the growth of fungus and mold, it's important to have a keen eye on this issue prior to breaking ground on a hydrothermal area. Thankfully, there are plenty of ways to minimize and control these issues – from choosing the right building and surface materials to establishing correct ventilation and drainage – and then, of course, through continued maintenance and cleaning.

Hygienic By Design

It's vitally important that these spaces are designed and built while taking into account that every area within them will need to be thoroughly cleaned – that means literally leaving no surfaces out of arm's reach. In short, no matter how appealing these spaces are designed to be, they also need to be cleanable. This means it's important to think about the design of these rooms from the perspective of the person(s) who will ultimately have to clean it. How will they get in and out of an area? Where will cleaning products be stored? Is there access to water for cleaning? What about access to electricity for any cleaning devices?

And, of course, all the building materials and finishes for these spaces should be chosen based on how well they can withstand the effects of steam, sweat, oils and cleaning agents. This might seem like a “no brainer” but it's often overlooked when designers/developers are in the throes of creating their dream spa area.

Does the design incorporate features that ensure the most hygienic results? For example, rounded corners are better than square corners for seating areas/benches to facilitate easier cleaning, while sloped surfaces are a must to minimize water pooling on seats or other flat surfaces. There also needs to be an easy pathway for water and cleaning solutions to reach in-floor drainage.

The surfaces for benches, floors and walls in thermal rooms should be chosen to minimize the number of potential joints (i.e., grout lines). This makes cleaning and disinfecting easier and has the added bonus of being longer lasting and requiring less maintenance. Crucially, look to ‘specialist’ hydrothermal building materials, such as mortar-coated, expanded, polystyrene hard foam, to clad walls, floors, steps, benches

and shelves to make them completely waterproof and mold-resistant – this is the best protection against keeping any mold and bacteria from forming.

Good Ventilation Keeps Airborne Bacteria at Bay

Regardless of the type of thermal room or cabin you have — sauna, steam bath, hammam, relaxation room, etc. — proper ventilation is crucial for keeping airborne bacteria away. It not only keeps the oxygen levels correct, but it also ensures that rooms with high humidity get an opportunity to dry out. If you're concerned about ventilation in your hydrothermal areas, now's a great opportunity to correct any oversights that might enable mold, fungus or bacteria spores to take hold. When reviewing air quality and ventilation, note that air in a sauna should be refreshed 7 to 10 times per hour, while the accepted air exchange rate for steam rooms is 6 times per hour.

Cleaning as easy as 1-2-3

The truth is, cleaning a steam room, hammam, or other tiled room, is really as simple as cleaning a bathroom. Regular soap and water will clean the surfaces and even wash germs away and cut down their quantity; but, to actually *kill* germs, you must sanitize or disinfect all surfaces after cleaning them. The best way to do this is to follow the CDC's recommendations to use cleaning products with at least 70% isopropyl alcohol.

Disinfecting a sauna is similar: first clean the surfaces with soapy water and then use 3% hydrogen peroxide straight from the bottle.

If you're planning on a deep clean, avoid commercial steam cleaners or pressure washers because they can damage tile grout and remove the wood's natural protective surface. Instead, opt for a domestic-quality, low pressure steam cleaner as an excellent way to remove excess, residual dirt and body oils before any of the above cleaning processes are undertaken.

Of course, the products and methods recommended here are only as good as the people applying them. Typically, it's much more effective to engage spa staff in cleaning these areas instead of 3rd party contractors. Provide employees with inhalation masks, protective glasses or full-face visors and gloves for standard protection when handling any chemical cleaners and use small brushes to ensure all corners and niches are cleaned.

At A Glance: Top Hygiene Tips for Saunas, Steamrooms, etc.

- Good hygiene starts during the design and build process
 - Using the correct building and surface materials is imperative to keeping these hot and moist rooms free of bacteria
 - Correct ventilation and drainage are crucial

- Design for easy cleaning and disinfecting
 - Rounded corners are easier to clean than square corners
 - Sloped surfaces will minimize water pooling on seats/floors
 - Choose large tile surfaces to minimize grout lines
- Cleaning tips
 - First use soap and water to clean the surfaces and wash germs away
 - Disinfect a steam room (or other tiled room) with cleaning products using at least 70% isopropyl alcohol
 - Disinfect a sauna with 3% hydrogen peroxide
- Bonus ventilation tip: At the end of each day's use, instruct your team to keep the doors ajar to further increase ventilation and assist in drying the rooms out.

About Design *for* Leisure: [Design for Leisure](#) specializes in the design of award-winning hydrothermal spa and wellness environments. Headquartered in London and Austin, TX, the company has been creating high-end, turnkey wet spa areas for both luxury homes and professional wellness projects for almost three decades. Clients include well-known hospitality and spa brands, such as Disney, Canyon Ranch, Caesars Palace, Four Seasons and Six Senses, as well as well-known architect groups, including Foster and Partners, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, Bjark Ingels Group, Michael Graves and Thomas Heatherwick.