

Decontaminating Vaginal Specula

The following is a step-by-step guide to disinfecting vaginal specula safely and expeditiously. Use these same principles for other instruments for which high-level disinfection is chosen.

Step 1: Contain & Transport

Immediately after use, place contaminated specula inside a covered container (labeled with the biohazard symbol) and tightly cover with a lid. Use a container without grooves or seams that is easy to clean and carry. Then, transport the contaminated specula to a designated cleaning area. Soaking the specula prior to washing will loosen cellular debris and facilitate cleaning, but do not use glutaraldehyde for this purpose.

Step 2: Clean

The most critical step in the decontamination and sterilization process is cleaning specula to remove debris that interferes with the sterilization or disinfection process. Clean as soon as practically possible after use so that organic material will not dry on the specula. Until the cleaning process is initiated, minimize the handling of contaminated specula by personnel who are not wearing adequate, or any, protective attire.

Clean by scrubbing the specula with a detergent solution or use a mechanical device such as an ultrasonic cleaner. When manually washing the specula, be sure and scrub them beneath the water with a soft-bristled brush; then rinse well under running water. Do not use sponges or wood-handled brushes for this process as these common cleaning tools are easily contaminated and harbor microorganisms.

Step 3: Disinfect or Sterilize

Vaginal specula contact patients' mucous membranes or non-intact skin, placing them in the "semi-critical" category of items that require special handling and sterilization or high-level disinfection prior to reuse. Autoclaving is the best choice for sterilizing specula, but if an autoclave is not available, use high-level disinfection.

Keeping Employees Safe During Instrument Disinfection

- Designate a specific area for instrument cleaning, away from patient and employee traffic.
- Use leak-proof, rigid, covered containers to transport contaminated items to the cleaning area.
- Prohibit routine hand washing in the cleaning area.
- Cleaning and rinsing instruments will undoubtedly generate splashes and sprays, and high-level disinfectants are harmful to the skin, eyes and respiratory tract. Provide employees with protective equipment such as face shields, goggles, gowns or aprons, and heavy-duty utility gloves.