

Sanitary Conversations 1-5-18

As a teenager visiting Paragon Park's public bathroom with my friend, we began to comb our hair at the sink where we had just washed our hands. That is where the mirror was, so, it made sense to us. This was back in the day when rest rooms had an attendant. As we began to fix our hair, a woman sitting in a chair near the entryway called out, "No combing your hair at the sink. It isn't sanitary," But she pronounced it "tanitary". My friend and I looked at each other and complied but as soon as we left, we cracked up laughing and quoted the tanitary warning for the rest of the night!

Who knew that what was hilarious to me as a teen, would become everyday serious conversation for me as an adult?

A recent conversation about sanitizing solution at a kitchen inspection brought the humor and irony of this to the surface. We were having the usual conversation about what resides under the sink. As I so often discover, there lurked an expensive cleanser claiming to kill 99.9% of bacteria. People tend to think of this as a sanitizer because of that claim. It is a cleanser, though, with anti-bacterial ingredients added. It needs to be thoroughly rinsed before the final sanitizing step can be accomplished for food-contact surfaces.

There lie two more problems with this type of cleanser: Not only is it confusing, we have to wonder; is it a cleanser or is it a sanitizer? And what is the antibacterial component? More and more containers make it almost impossible to find the answer and finding the answer can save a life! Some product containers say in small print, "Peel back the label for more information." Who is going to bother? Some even refer you to a website in teeny tiny print. Who is going to do that? This spray bottle in my hand had the sanitizing ingredient in tiny white print against a yellow background. It was an ammonium product, being stored right next to the chlorine bleach they use as their sanitizer. Ammonia and chlorine, when mixed, produce a deadly gas. The deadly gas does not modify its chemical reaction in cases of ignorance or accidents.

The second problem with the cleanser being loaded with antibacterial qualities was mirrored by what sat on the counter near the hand washing sink; antibacterial soap. Both are unnecessary, and both are contributing to the potentially lethal and challenging dilemma for physicians and scientists; resistant bacteria. They are smarter than us. They know how to evolve so that they can survive. They compete with one another and the strong ones win. Let's not help

bacteria with their survival of the fittest battle. Just wash with soap and warm water.

The third problem with these sanitizing soaps and cleansers happens when they are rinsed down the sink and arrive in the septic system. Both small onsite ones and large municipal ones are being destroyed. They are living systems, much like our gut, and we need good bacteria there. Really.

That conversation accomplished, we moved on to sanitizing solution. They used chlorine bleach and water, as most small establishments do. I saw they had a spray bottle nicely labeled “Sanitizing Solution”. Pulling a testing strip from my inspection bag, I gave the strip a spray, then another and then another. Nothing. I was told, “That’s odd. It tested fine yesterday.”

Ah, ha! Problem solved. They were expecting the chlorine to stay there forever, not realizing it dissipates. The two women were eager to improve the situation and very agreeable to emptying the container after each event and make it anew with each new event. They also loved that their own mystery had been solved for they, too had noticed something was wrong at times.

As they laughed about this discovery, one said jokingly, “We lead such fascinating lives, that talking about sanitizing is interesting!” Thinking they were talking about me, I said, “Oh, I know. It is difficult to take off the health agent hat. Invite me to a party and I will still talk about septic systems, food safety or tick-borne illnesses.” They laughed and laughed at that, for they were referring to themselves! They are every health agent’s dream team; eager to learn and really caring!

How refreshing to have fun talking about sanitizers with caring food safety managers! This bodes well for a new year!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax. She can be reached at cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us or 781 293 6768.