

Implementing RTU Sanitizing Wipes In Your Foodservice Operation



by Hal King, Ph.D., *Active Food Safety*

1. HOW CAN AN OPERATOR HELP THEIR ONSITE TEAM TRANSITION FROM RAG/BUCKET TO WIPES?

Start with the reason, not the product. Tell teams the change is being made to reduce cross-contamination, simplify execution, and remove guesswork around reusable towel use requirements such as when appropriate to use and where not to use them. Then make the new method easier than the old one:

- Remove most red buckets from the target workstations on day one (e.g., near food prep areas with food contact surface)
- Place wipes exactly where the task occurs
- Train by station
- Use a simple rule: one wipe, one area, then discard
- Define when wipes are appropriate and when heavy soil still requires cleaning first using cloth towel method
- Have managers coach live during the first 2 weeks





That approach is supported by the underlying problem with reusable cloth towel systems: they depend on many controls being right at once, and breakdowns are common in the field.

2. IS THERE A SPECIFIC LOCATION THAT MOST EFFECTIVELY PLACES THE WIPES AT THE WORKSTATION?

Yes: at the point of decision and point of high touch surfaces.

- Main assembly table/prep line: mounted at the end or side of the station, reachable with one step or less, but not directly mounted over exposed food.
- Refrigerator/freezer handles: nearby wall mount or bracket next to the handle zones.
- Control panel buttons/POS/touchscreens/chef's screen: immediately adjacent, because these are classic high-touch surfaces.
- Fryer station: near the controls and adjacent handles, but not in the grease splash zone or where heat degrades packaging.
- Do not put wipes in a shared back corner or under the counter where staff must bend, leave station, or cross traffic.

Bad placement kills compliance. If the wipe is not easier to find and use than staff will revert.

3. HOW FREQUENTLY SHOULD AN OPERATION CLEAN AND SANITIZE SURFACES IN A RESTAURANT? IS THERE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR BEST FREQUENCY?

The best answer is risk-based frequency, not one universal time interval.

Clean and Sanitize:

- After visible contamination
- After raw protein handling or allergen exposure
- Between tasks
- Before starting ready-to-eat prep on a surface
- After cleaning up spills
- At defined routine intervals for high-touch surfaces during service

The science supports frequent, repeated control because contamination can transfer quickly across surfaces during cloth wiping events, and reused cloth systems get riskier as use continues. I would not tell

operators "every 4 hours is enough" for high-touch surfaces.

4. HOW TO STRUCTURE AN IN-SERVICE SOP?

Keep it to one page and station-specific:

Purpose: Prevent cross-contamination on high-touch and food-contact surfaces.

Applies to: List exact stations/surfaces.

When to use: Before opening, between tasks, after contamination, every scheduled check, at closing.

How to use:

1. Remove visible food/debris first.
2. If heavy grease/soil is present, clean first with detergent per SOP.
3. Wipe the surface thoroughly with the RTU wipe.
4. Keep the surface visibly wet for the label contact time.
5. Let air dry.
6. Discard wipe after use or after one small area/task.

Do not: Use one wipe across multiple stations, use on heavy grease without pre-cleaning, return wipes to containers loosely, or store canisters away from the station.

Monitoring: Manager observes 2–3 times per shift.

Corrective action: Retrain immediately, re-sanitize surface correctly, restock wipes.

That structure fits the PCP/SOP logic in a FSMS: define the control, train execution, monitor it, and define corrective action.

5. WHAT ARE FREQUENT PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSITION AND HOW DO YOU IMPROVE BEHAVIOR AT STORE LEVEL?

Common failures:

- Employees use wipes on dirty/greasy surfaces without cleaning first
- One wipe gets used too long
- Wipes are stored too far from the work
- Managers fail to restock
- No one knows required wet contact time
- Staff think wipes are only for dining room tables, not for high-touch and food contact back-of-house surfaces



Implementing RTU Sanitizing Wipes In Your Foodservice Operation

Best fixes:

- Remove the old option where possible
- Define exact approved surfaces for wipes
- Add photos of those surfaces to sops
- Restock at shift change
- Use supervisor spot checks
- Track 2–3 compliance behaviors, not 20
- Reward speed plus correct use, not speed alone

6. TIPS FOR LANGUAGE BARRIER ISSUES USING JOB AIDS?

Use almost no text.

- Pictograms
- Photos of the actual workstation
- Arrows showing wipe path and discard step
- Translated headers only
- Short repeated phrases like “wipe, keep surface wet to dry, discard”
- Live demo plus return demo by employee
- Color-coding by zone or task

If a training aid looks like a policy manual, it will fail in-store.

7. ANYTHING ELSE ENCOUNTERED?

Yes. The biggest strategic point is this: RTU wipes should be positioned as a compliance tool and behavior control, not only as a cleaning and sanitation product. The real value is that they reduce variation between stores and employees. Also, be careful not to oversell them as the answer for every sanitation task. Operators will trust the message more if the manager clearly says:

- Wipes are ideal for high-touch and lightly soiled food-contact surfaces
- Heavy soil still requires proper cleaning first
- Placement, restocking, and manager reinforcement determine success

References

- *Characterizing Microbial Cross-Contamination on Large Surfaces Using a Traditional “Cloth and Bucket” Disinfection Method.* 2020. Rebecca M. Goulter, James S. Clayton, Robin Grant Moore, Justin M. Bradshaw, Jason W. Frye, Esa J. Puntch, and Lee-Ann Jaykus. *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 40, No. 6, pp. 392–401.
- *Identity and Numbers of Bacteria Present on Tabletops and in Dishcloths Used to Wipe Down Tabletops in Public Restaurants and Bars.* 2006. M. Susana Yepiz-Gomez, Kelly R. Bright, and Charles P. Gerba. *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 26, No. 11, pp. 786–792.
- *Is It Time to Change How We Clean and Sanitize Food Contact Surfaces with Reusable Wiping Towels?* 2018. Hal King, Ph.D. *Food Safety Magazine*.
- *Sanitation Prerequisite Programs as a Necessary Component of FSMS for Foodservice Establishments.* 2022. Hal King, Ph.D. *Food Safety Magazine*.



Implementing RTU Sanitizing Wipes In Your Foodservice Operation

Moving a foodservice operation from reusable cloths in sanitizer buckets to ready-to-use sanitizing wipes should be framed as a simplification and risk-reduction project, not just a product substitution. The practical reason is straightforward: reusable wiping cloth systems only work when several controls are executed correctly every time—proper sanitizer concentration, clean solution, separation by task, daily laundering, limited soil load, and correct use sequence. When those controls break down, cloths can spread bacteria, viruses, spores, and potentially allergens from one surface to the next. Studies cited in the provided materials found coliforms on 89.2% of in-use cloths and E. coli on 54.1% of cloths, and one field survey noted that table cleaning with reusable cloths increased bacterial counts on tabletops by about 2 log. A later study showed that the traditional “cloth and bucket” method can efficiently transfer contamination across consecutive surfaces, while proper QAC concentration reduced bacterial transfer but did not eliminate all transfer risk for harder-to-inactivate organisms. Even when sanitizer solutions tested low for contamination, wiping cloths themselves still carried high coliform counts in field sampling increasing risk of cross contamination.

For operators, the implementation message should be: Wipes reduce dependence on perfect bucket chemistry and perfect employee behavior. That does not mean wipes replace cleaning. Heavily soiled surfaces still need debris removal with cloth towels and, when necessary, a detergent-cleaning step before sanitizing. Wipes work best for high-touch surfaces and lightly soiled food-contact surfaces where speed, consistency, and one-wipe-one-task behavior matter most. Single-use wipes avoid the accumulation and reuse risks associated with cloths, while reusable systems remain more appropriate for heavy soil removal if the process requires it.

Operationally, the best rollout of single use wipes is by workstation and by use case. Place wipes at the point of use, mounted or staged where the employee naturally reaches without crossing over food or clean utensils. The priority locations are high-touch, high-frequency points: assembly lines, prep counters, POS or control buttons, refrigerator and freezer handles, and chef screens. Fryer areas usually need a split approach: wipes for control panels, handles, and adjacent high-touch surfaces; a separate degreasing/cleaning procedure for heavily greasy splash zones. The rule should be simple: use wipes for quick sanitation of lightly soiled food contact surfaces, frequently touched surfaces, and use the full clean-then-sanitize SOP for visible food, grease, or heavy residue.

On frequency, the best defensible answer is not “every other hour” or “less than four hours” as a blanket standard. Frequency should be risk-based and triggered by use, contamination, and task change. In practice, sanitize food-contact and high-touch surfaces after contamination events, after raw-to-ready-to-eat transitions, between tasks when cross-contact is possible, and at regular intervals defined by the operation’s flow. For the busiest high-touch surfaces, more frequent sanitation than every four hours is usually warranted because real risk is tied to touch events and soil load, not the clock alone. The scientific evidence supports the need for repeated control because contamination can be moved quickly from one surface to another, and the FSMS/PRP approach stresses defining the SOP, the control point, the monitoring method, and the corrective action rather than relying on vague expectations.

The in-service SOP should therefore be short, visual, and behavior-based: What surface, when to use, where wipes are stored, how to handle visible soil first, required wet contact time per label, discard after use, and what not to do. The biggest transition failures will be predictable: staff using one wipe on too many surfaces, using wipes on greasy surfaces without pre-cleaning, leaving wipe dispensers far from the work zone, treating wipes as a replacement for all cleaning chemistry, and weak manager follow-through. The best store-level behavior fixes are visual placement, color-coded use zones, training at each station, supervisor observation checklists, and bilingual pictorial instructions. Language barriers are solved best with icons, photographs of the actual station, a few repeated command phrases, and demonstration-based training rather than text-heavy SOPs.

References

- *Characterizing Microbial Cross-Contamination on Large Surfaces Using a Traditional “Cloth and Bucket” Disinfection Method.* 2020. Rebecca M. Goulter, James S. Clayton, Robin Grant Moore, Justin M. Bradshaw, Jason W. Frye, Esa J. Puntch, and Lee-Ann Jaykus. *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 40, No. 6, pp. 392–401.
- *Identity and Numbers of Bacteria Present on Tabletops and in Dishcloths Used to Wipe Down Tabletops in Public Restaurants and Bars.* 2006. M. Susana Yepiz-Gomez, Kelly R. Bright, and Charles P. Gerba. *Food Protection Trends*, Vol. 26, No. 11, pp. 786–792.
- *Is It Time to Change How We Clean and Sanitize Food Contact Surfaces with Reusable Wiping Towels?* 2018. Hal King, Ph.D. *Food Safety Magazine*.
- *Sanitation Prerequisite Programs as a Necessary Component of FSMS for Foodservice Establishments.* 2022. Hal King, Ph.D. *Food Safety Magazine*.

