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# HandpieceHeadlines®

April - June 2010

Your Source for Industry News & Information

**WHY FINISH THE DRYING CYCLE?**

## AUTOCLAVING: New Reasons to Finish the Drying Cycle

### CDC Guidelines for Handpiece Maintenance

**W**e have always told customers to make sure to leave handpieces and instruments in the autoclave until the drying cycle is complete. We know that removing items early can lead to spotting and eventual pitting of the handpiece shell or instrument.



**PART 3**

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) has now given us another reason to complete the autoclave drying cycle. Recent CDC Guidelines for Infection Control in Dental Health-Care Settings state the following:

“Instrument packs should be allowed to dry inside the sterilizer chamber before removing and handling. Packs should not be touched until they are cool and dry because hot packs act as wicks, absorbing moisture, and hence, bacteria from hands.”

#### Wicking

We discussed this phenomenon known as “wicking” with Jennifer A. Harte, DDS,

MS, chief military consultant for dental infection control to the Air Force Surgeon General. “After heat sterilizing a handpiece, it is critical to allow packages to dry and cool inside the sterilizer chamber to maintain sterility,” explains Dr. Harte. “Autoclave packs should not be touched until they are cool and dry because hot



Everything you sterilize should finish the drying cycle

packs act as wicks, absorbing moisture, and hence, bacteria from hands and the environment.”

This means a damp autoclave bag could pick up bacteria from a dental assistant’s bare hands or gloves, or even a countertop or tray. “This pertains to all sterilized packages,” says Harte, “not just those containing handpieces.”

We know it is very common for handpieces to not be used immediately after being autoclaved. Frequently the autoclave pouches remain closed and the handpieces stay in them during storage or even transportation (possibly to Hayes for repair). If these

*continued on next page >>*



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CDC Guidelines for Handpiece Maintenance

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handpieces have not completed the drying cycle, and they are picked up and placed into a cabinet or drawer for future use, that's when even more moisture from hands gets into the pouches, creating the ideal breeding ground for bacteria.

Another concern is that the paper side of wet bags, especially those containing heavy instruments, can easily tear, exposing the sterilized item to the air. Of course, anything placed into the autoclave should continue to be packaged and the quality of the autoclave bag should be considered. "The purpose of packaging is to protect instruments from contamination after removal from the sterilizer and during storage," says Harte. "Therefore, instruments must be packaged before being placed in the sterilizer and quality packaging materials must be used to ensure sterility is maintained."

### Drying Cycle Options

If a vacuum drying cycle is not available, such as with a pre/post vacuum autoclave, you could use another method for drying packs such as an automatic open-door drying cycle or having the sterilizer pull in fresh air through filters. "If these options are not available, it is necessary

to manually open the sterilizer door to allow moisture to escape," states Harte. If you are having a problem with wet packs and cannot resolve the issue after consulting the sterilizer instruction manuals, you should contact the manufacturer for assistance.

For more information, review the CDC Guidelines for Infection Control in Dental Health-Care Settings at [www.cdc.gov/OralHealth/infectioncontrol/guidelines/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/OralHealth/infectioncontrol/guidelines/index.htm)

Hayes Handpiece offers free maintenance demonstrations where we review proper autoclaving procedures with office staff. Please call your local office to schedule your maintenance demonstration. All attendees receive one free CE credit.

**DISCLAIMER:** The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the U.S. Department of Defense or other departments of the U.S. government.



Special thanks to **JENNIFER A. HARTE, DDS, MS** for her expertise. Dr. Harte is the chief military consultant for dental infection control to the Air Force Surgeon General, U.S. Air Force Dental Evaluation and Consultation Service, Great Lakes, IL.

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