

# Hotel Cleanliness Policies in the Time of COVID-19

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This article explores operational changes, specifically looking at cleanliness, as the hotel industry adapts to the challenges of COVID-19, outlining the initial response taken by hoteliers and examining where we are as an industry today and what to expect in the future, now that brands have established procedures and protocols for addressing the pandemic.

## Outbreak and the Initial Response at the Height of Impact

COVID-19 has posed challenges never seen before by the hotel industry, requiring owners, managers, and brands to take new precautions to keep both guests and staff safe. The industry faced the added challenge of not only creating a safe lodging environment but also creating the impression of security to give guests the confidence to travel again. As the virus rapidly spread around the globe, brands quickly got to work on creating new standards to implement throughout their chains; however, local owners and management companies needed to take immediate steps to address the pandemic and make changes that best reflected the most up-to-date science at that time. As occupancy levels plummeted and average rate (ADR) suffered, many hotel operators decided that the best way to limit their losses was to temporarily suspend operations and close the hotel. Of the hotels that remained open, the changes made at the individual properties varied given the lack of uniformed brand standards at that time; however, many operational changes were common throughout the industry and implemented by most hotels.



These changes included closing or limiting guest access to many amenities such as business centers, pools, and fitness facilities. In addition, most select- and full-service hotels closed their food and beverage (F&B) outlets, while limited-service hotels stopped offering complimentary breakfast or reduced their offerings to a pre-assembled grab-and-go continental breakfast. In addition to making hotels safer, these changes had the added benefit of helping hoteliers reduce costs. Another adjustment that helped, both in terms of safety and from a cost perspective, was limiting housekeeping. Many hotels stopped offering stay-over guests daily housekeeping services and would only clean the room after a guest checked out or every three to five days for guests staying more than a couple nights. Many hotel operators would also let a room sit vacant for 24 to 48 hours after a guest checked out, before sending housekeepers to clean that room. Furthermore, it was common for management to strategically place guests in a way that limited the number of occupied rooms per floor. Given the low occupancy levels, most hotels had enough inventory that room turnover was not a concern. Similar to the reduced F&B offerings, the room changes helped operators manage labor costs by being able to limit the number of days housekeeping staff was needed each week.

## **Where We Are Now**

All the major brands have released guidance for the franchisees, laying out their new cleaning protocols and brand standards, such as IHG launching its “Way of Clean” program with its “Clean Promise,” Hyatt’s “Global Care & Cleanliness Commitment” building on their existing safety and cleanliness protocols, Marriott assembling a Cleanliness Council to implement its “Commitment to Clean” initiative, and Hilton launching its “CleanStay Experience” and “EventReady Playbook.” Common procedures across the brands have included the production of branded signage stating the new safety precautions in place and promoting social distancing. After the initial shortage in hand sanitizer, it is now more readily available and hand sanitizing stations are positioned throughout public areas in most hotels. Most front-desk areas have partitions in place to provide a physical barrier between guests and staff, many hotels are requiring face masks for both staff and guests, and all the brands have increased the frequency of which they clean public spaces and high-touch areas, such as elevator buttons.

Since occupancy has increased, most hotels are back to having housekeeping staff available seven days a week; however, housekeeping services remain reduced for guests staying more than one night, including linens being changed only upon request. When guests do check out, rooms receive enhanced cleanings that include renewed focus on high-touch areas such as light switches, door handles, television remotes, and thermostats. Other common changes include non-essential items being removed from the guestroom, including pens, notepads, and excess furniture, as well as door seals being placed on the exterior of guestrooms once housekeeping has finished and the room has been inspected and verified as meeting the respective brand’s updated cleaning policy.

With brand guidance in place, many hotel amenities are beginning to reopen. Many full- and select-service hotels have reopened their F&B outlets; however, it is still common for these outlets to have reduced hours, decreased seating, and limited menus. While many limited-service hotels still have not ramped up their complimentary breakfast offerings, some hotels have reintroduced complimentary hot breakfast but have replaced the buffet-style service with take-away containers prepared by staff based on the items requested by the guest. Where allowed by state regulations, many pools and fitness centers are operational again with increased cleaning schedules and new signage restricting the use of some equipment to ensure social distancing.

## Remaining Challenges and Future Plans

Since the peak of the pandemic's impact, occupancy and ADR have been trending upwards, attributed primarily to both the recovering economy and the implementation of new brand standards; however, many challenges remain. In addition to the financial challenges still facing the industry, hotel operators continue to face hygiene-related issues pertaining to COVID-19. Despite the notable steps and cleanliness guarantees offered by the brands, many guests are still cautious while staying in hotels, which has led to some unforeseen challenges at the property level, such as guests traveling with their own cleaning products. Often the products brought by guests are much harsher than what is necessary, leading to increasing wear and tear on many FF&E items. Some brands, such as Marriott, have begun providing disinfectant wipes within their guestrooms as a way of discouraging guests from using their own cleaning products. Furthermore, the politicization of mask wearing has posed challenges for local hotel operators when trying to enforce this policy in public areas.

In addition to the challenges at the property level, brands are still diligently working to improve the way they respond to the pandemic. While demand increases within the commercial and leisure segments have been realized, demand growth within the meeting/group segment remains stagnant. Brands are continuing to improve the way they host meetings and larger events, again with a focus on providing both a safe environment and the perception of safety. Another notable change is the fast tracking of the technology that allows for mobile check-ins and contactless stays. While some brands, such as Hilton, were working on this long before the pandemic, COVID-19 has encouraged many other brands, such as Best Western, to speed up their plans and make the option of a mobile check-in a priority.

As the science and our understanding of the virus continue to improve, and as brands and local hotel operators gain more experience dealing with this pandemic, industry best practices will continue to evolve.