

Tips for a New Sterile Processing Technician

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Starting a new job is stressful. Learning thousands of instruments and thoroughly cleaning and preparing each for patient use can be overwhelming. Before jumping in to learn all the details, the Clinical Education veterans at STERIS have some pointers for the Sterile Processing Technicians just starting out.

“You want to go home in the same condition that you came in for your shift.”

Manon LaFlame Clinical Education Specialist Canada Operation

Processing used surgical instrumentation and medical devices exposes technicians to many potential hazards and dangers. Here are some hazards to be aware of.

- Bloodborne pathogens and infectious microorganisms can hide in and on used instrumentation.
- Chemicals used to remove surgical soils and kill microorganisms can be toxic, corrosive, and irritating.

- Bending, lifting, and twisting to move trays of instruments upwards of 25 pounds/11 kilograms can strain backs and cause injuries.
- Standing in one spot for extended periods of time can cause fatigue.

Always wear personal protective equipment (PPE) right for the task at hand. Preventing exposure of dangerous materials to skin, nose, mouth, and airways is the best way to protect oneself and others. Table 1 lists the PPE requirements typically associated with sterile processing activities.

A common error made by many new technicians is improper wearing of the face mask. Face masks should cover the nose and mouth. The mask should be adjusted to ensure that it contacts the skin, leaving no gaps. Nose bands can be bent to form a seal at the bridge of the nose. Elastic band or ties should be positioned on the head to prevent puckering along the sides of the mask. Not covering the nose or having side puckers in the masks allow unfiltered potentially contaminated air to enter the lungs which could lead to infection.

Learning Objectives

- 1. List safety considerations that a new technician should know**
- 2. Describe the items and organizations that can help a new technician learn the complex tasks of sterile processing**
- 3. Create a proactive plan to learn department dynamics and culture**

Contributed by:



Common Tasks

Personal Protective Equipment

Common Tasks	Personal Protective Equipment
Manual Cleaning	Facility provided scrubs, fluid resistant face mask, face shield, fluid-resistant gown, general purpose utility gloves, fluid resistant shoe covers, and hair cover
Changing drums of cleaning chemistries	Facility provided scrubs, fluid resistant face mask, face shield, fluid-resistant gown, general purpose utility gloves, fluid resistant shoe covers, hair cover, steel toe shoes
Tray Assembly	Facility provided scrubs with long sleeves, gloves when handling manually cleaned but not disinfected items
Steam Sterilization	Facility provided scrubs with long sleeves, thermal protective gloves, shoe covers, hair cover
Vaporized Hydrogen Peroxide Sterilization	Facility provided scrubs with long sleeves, chemical resistant gloves, shoe covers, hair cover

Table 1: List of common personal protective equipment for sterile processing activities.

A second common error is donning of general-purpose gloves. Typically, technicians first don disposal gloves with long cuffs. The gloves are pulled over the sleeve. Next, a general-purpose glove is worn over the disposable gloves and sleeve. The general-purpose glove prevents cleaning solution from reaching the technicians' hands and sleeves. The internal disposable gloves help prevent fluid contact if the general-purpose glove is cut or punctured during cleaning.

Decontamination technicians wear shoe covers and bouffant hair covers to protect themselves from splashes during manual cleaning and drips from carrying wet medical devices. It is important to remove these potentially contaminated items before leaving the department.

Familiarize yourself with the location and use of room safety equipment. Learn how to work it before an emergency. Emergency showers, eye wash stations, fire extinguishers, and chemical spill kits should have clear instructions. If instructions are not immediately available, ask for them. This education should be covered in your orientation to the department.

Locate emergency stop buttons or cords on equipment prior to use. Emergency stops work faster than canceling a cycle and could be the difference between serious and fatal injuries. This is especially true when staff clean or service equipment.

Cart washers pose a particular safety concern of individuals being trapped within the cart washer during a cleaning cycle. Internal kill cords allow trapped staff members to shut off the washer from the inside preventing bodily harm from hot water and cleaning chemistries. Find kill cord locations and ensure that they

are within reach when entering a cart washer.

Read the safety data sheets of the chemicals you work with. Safety data sheets (SDS) have valuable information about the chemical and potential harm it can cause. It lists PPE needed to protect oneself from chemical exposures. It also lists the first aid steps to take if an exposure to the chemical occurs.

Take steps to reduce ergonomic injuries and fatigue. Have experienced colleagues or supervisors show ergonomic lifting techniques. Some facilities may employ their occupational therapist to assess the sterile processing area for potential ergonomic injuries and help with finding solutions. Ask for anti-fatigue mats at stations where stationary standing occurs for extended periods of time. Consider sweat wicking under garments and compression socks to help reduce discomfort and fatigue when working within the decontamination space.

Figure 1: Technician wearing personal protective equipment for manual cleaning



Figure 1: Technician wearing personal protective equipment for manual cleaning

Lesson:

Tips for a New Sterile Processing Technician

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This lesson was developed by STERIS. Lessons are administered by Endeavor Business Media.

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Healthcare Sterile Processing

Association, myhspa.org, has pre-approved this in-service for 1.0 Continuing Education Credits for a period of three years, until June 5, 2027.

For more information, direct any questions to *Healthcare Purchasing News* editor@hpnonline.com.

Quiz Answers:

1. D, 2. D, 3. D, 4. A, 5. A, 6. B, 7. D, 8. C, 9. B, 10. B

“Rome was not built in a day, and neither will your skill mix for the position. Relax, take a deep breath, and enjoy the journey. You will be amazed at how much knowledge you build every day.”

Delores O’Connell Senior Clinical Education Specialist Pacific Northwest U.S.

The first week can be overwhelming when starting in sterile processing. Thousands of instruments; multiple cleaning, disinfection, and sterilization instructions; and a general fear of not delivering what was promised at the interview can overwhelm even the most confident new technician. No one is expected to know everything the first week.

Learning takes time and repetition. Read all policies and procedures. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for use and work instructions each time. If you cannot find them, ask! Do not fear asking sterile processing supervisors and other experienced sterile processing staff members for help.

Sterile processing is a complex ever-changing industry. Keep up on the latest best practices by asking for and reading the standards followed by the facility. Standards often give the why behind what the facility requires staff to do.

Establishing a network helps new technicians expand their pool of experts to ask questions and gain valuable education. Networks can include external and internal people. Becoming a member of a local sterile processing association and attending meetings will accelerate the learning curve.

Many organizations have networking software, such as Microsoft Teams, which allows staff from different facilities within the same healthcare organization to reach out to each other. Ask to join internet teams and shared education sites.

Technicians should consider certification, even if they have attended a trade school for sterile processing. Certification shows commitment but also opens a great deal of education opportunities and resources provided by their certifying organization.

The Healthcare Sterile Processing Association (HSPA) and The Certification Board of Sterile Processing and Distribution (CBSPD) are sterile processing certification organizations which provide online education lesson plans, publications, and a host of resources including career development, reference guides, and sample documents to name a few.

Join a local chapter of a national professional organization that supports sterile processing professionals. Often, these organizations provide education during chapter meetings and a platform to meet others within your profession. Take advantage of all opportunities that these organizations can provide.

“Talk to your colleagues and be proactive. Never be afraid to ask a question.”

Arthur Henderson Senior Clinical Education Specialist Southeast U.S.

Sterile processing is a profession, and technicians are professionals. Establishing a professional relationship with colleagues is important. Make time to talk to colleagues. Ask them about the department’s culture. What makes the department tick? Why do people stay? Do not be afraid to ask colleagues how to succeed and what tips they may have for someone new to sterile processing.

Avoid the rumor mill. Rumors are nonproductive and could leave colleagues with a negative first impression. Excuse yourself or change the subject when rumors creep into a conversation. If unavoidable, do not agree or disagree with the rumor. Stay neutral.

Learn the sterile processing department’s team dynamics. This requires conversations. Learn how colleagues communicate and their work styles. Some colleagues may come in and immediately organize their workspace. Others may seek information on priorities and problems prior to settling in to work. Understanding preferences and communication styles can aid the new technician when trying to fit in.



Figure 2: Arrow showing location of kill cord in cart washer.

Discover what happens at shift change. Make note of what is reported and how it is reported. Communication styles, department resources, and key names, such as the vendor service technician, can be golden nuggets learned during shift change communications.

Being proactive is more than starting a task without being told. Proactive technicians arrive early and are never late. They take stock of the environment and look for opportunities to contribute. Once an opportunity is found they jump right in. Willingness to help is key when developing the trust of colleagues.

It is also important to ask for help. Though it may be true that anything can be “figured out” given time, it is not the most productive way to manage it. Knowing when to ask for help is an important part of being proactive. Never be afraid to ask a question or to be shown the correct way to complete a task. Learning the right way is the best way.

Planning is a critical part of any endeavor. New technicians should have an onboarding plan ready and waiting

on the first day, but this is not always the case. If a facility does not have an onboarding plan or has left the new technician with more questions than answers, work with the supervisor to develop an education plan. Working together to develop the plan contributes to the technician-supervisor relationship and provides clear direction. Share the plan with colleagues, even those without direct responsibility for training. The entire department helps guide the education of the new technician and can help them when they themselves are unaware of missed steps or improper activities.

Learn and Grow

Sterile processing is an exciting profession with many opportunities. Take time to learn and cultivate connections. Discover the best career path as you grow into the sterile processing professional you will become. **HPN**

Visit <https://www.hpnonline.com/55055784> for references.

Tips for a New Sterile Processing Technician - Practice Quiz

1. **Which are potential hazards for sterile processing technicians?**
 - A. Blood borne pathogens
 - B. Cleaning chemistries
 - C. Bending and lifting
 - D. All of the above
2. **Which personal protective equipment is often worn incorrectly?**
 - A. Shoe Covers
 - B. Fluid resistant gown
 - C. Hair covers
 - D. Face masks
3. **What can enter the lungs if the nose is not covered by the face mask?**
 - A. Cigarette smoke
 - B. The odor of blood
 - C. Splashes
 - D. Potentially contaminated air
4. **Why should shoe covers and bouffant be removed prior to leaving the department?**
 - A. They may be contaminated
 - B. They may cause a slip
 - C. They are not needed
 - D. They do not have to be removed
5. **When is the best time to learn how to use safety equipment?**
 - A. Prior to an emergency or exposure
 - B. When there is a chemical spill
 - C. When the fire alarm sounds
 - D. During an emergency
6. **What is a kill cord?**
 - A. A cord used to trap insects
 - B. An emergency shut off found within the cart washer
 - C. A cord used to shut off the electricity
 - D. A cord used prevent the use of damaged equipment
7. **What should new technicians read?**
 - A. Facility Policies
 - B. Standards followed by the facility
 - C. Facility work instructions
 - D. All of the above
 - E. A and B only
8. **What can a technician's network do?**
 - A. Provide promotions
 - B. List the latest best practices
 - C. Give answers to questions
 - D. Gives employee reviews
9. **Which organization does not provide sterile processing certifications?**
 - A. Healthcare Sterile Processing Association (HSPA)
 - B. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
 - C. Certification Board of Sterile Processing and Distribution (CBSPD)
 - D. All of the above
10. **Why should discussions of rumors be avoided?**
 - A. Job termination
 - B. Gives a negative impression
 - C. Disrupts the workflow
 - D. d. They are harmless



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