EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

3.5 Disinfecting Books and Other Collections

Last updated: June 26, 2020

The advice below is based on the current research available from the medical and scientific communities regarding COVID-19, and as their understanding of the virus evolves, NEDCC's advice for the cultural heritage community will, too.

We highly recommend consulting the website of the REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) project, which is conducting scientific research on library-specific materials: https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/COVID-19-research-project.html.

QUARANTINE

The CDC has stated that the SARS-CoV-2 virus does not transfer readily from surfaces. That said, each organization will need to exercise caution in accordance with its risk tolerance.

The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) recommends a minimum 3-day quarantine of collection items as the most effective way to disinfect them after handling by staff and patrons. The REALM Project’s recent tests on library-specific materials, as well as a number of other studies, document an attenuation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus after 3 days; however, because some studies have found that a 7-day period is required—and because of the small number of studies overall—some institutions may opt to continue with a 7-day quarantine, which NEDCC recommended in an earlier version of this publication.

For specific material types, quarantine periods of different lengths may ultimately be found to be appropriate. Research results do not yet agree on the timeframes; however, the SARS-CoV-2 virus appears to lose its viability more quickly on cardboard surfaces than on plastic surfaces (e.g. books covered in polyester, Mylar, or other plastics, as well as plastic-based materials such as CD’s and DVD’s).

A 7-day quarantine is appropriate for any collection item about which a curator is uncertain.

DISINFECTING

Do not attempt to disinfect archival materials, museum objects, or other valuable collections unless under the guidance of a conservator.

The use of liquid disinfectants and powdered cleaners is damaging to library and archives materials and is not recommended. UV ray exposure as a means of sterilization is also not recommended. Placing materials in a microwave oven is not recommended and may result in fire. Additionally, the use of fogging disinfectants of any kind in spaces with collections is not recommended.

Disinfection is a strategy that may reduce the spread of COVID-19 in public spaces, and the CDC has a helpful guide on this subject for community facilities in general.

COMMUNICATION

NEDCC advises collecting institutions to inform the public about their approaches to disinfecting collection materials and to ensuring staff and patron safety. When customers understand what institutions are doing to mitigate risk, they are less likely to attempt their own, damaging disinfection methods at home.

STAFF SAFETY

The CDC has provided guidelines for protecting workers and customers who handle mail, packages, groceries, etc. In accordance with this information, staff should be directed to wear a face mask and to avoid touching their face when moving items into...
quarantine and to wash their hands for 20 seconds immediately afterwards, following CDC guidelines. viii

Hand washing with soap and water is recommended over using hand sanitizer because the former removes dirt and oils and the latter does not. ix Dirt and oils can transfer to collections and stain or damage them.

If a dedicated quarantine space cannot be established, staff can place items in bags until the quarantine period is over so that staff do not accidentally handle the items. It is not advisable to tightly seal the bags because this can create potentially-damaging microclimates.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


ENDNOTES


ii REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) Project. “Round 1 Test Results.”


vi Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Cleaning and Disinfection for Community Facilities.”

vii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “What Mail and Parcel Delivery Drivers Need to Know about COVID-19.”

viii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “When and How to Wash Your Hands.”
https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html

https://www.loc.gov/preservation/scientists/projects/sanitize.html