

Towel Laundering Tips

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If you use cloth towels in your pre-milking udder preparation, it is important to properly launder them between milkings. As the last thing to contact the teat prior to unit attachment, each towel should be virtually free of bacteria. Contaminated towels are a risk factor for mastitis infections and high bacteria counts in milk.

There are three effective methods of eliminating bacteria on towels: washing in hot water, adding bleach to the wash water, and drying on high heat. In fact, studies have demonstrated that it is only necessary to use one of these practices. However, our experience culturing towels in our lab and trouble-shooting contaminated towel problems suggests that more than one of these methods should be utilized. Here are some tips to help you reduce bacteria counts on your towels:

- **Don't overstuff the washer and dryer.** When a washer or dryer is overloaded, the towels can't circulate properly to come in contact with the water, detergent, bleach, and hot air, which means more bacteria will survive.
- **Clean your washing machine regularly.** Over time, a biofilm can form inside your washer. To keep it under control, use a scrub brush to clean the inside surfaces, then run an empty load with bleach, on a monthly basis. Also be sure to clean parts of the washer which clean towels could accidentally rub against when they are being removed from the washer, such as around the opening and the inside of the door.
- **Avoid re-contaminating towels after laundering.** Make sure any containers and aprons you use to store and transport towels are also cleaned regularly.
- **Microfiber towels need to be cared for differently.** Bleach and drying on high heat can ruin microfiber towels. Washing in hot water can be used to kill bacteria without damaging the material. In fact, care instructions for microfiber recommend washing in hot water (around 160 degrees F), in order to expand the spaces between the fibers and release more dirt from the material. Other suggestions for caring for microfiber towels: use liquid detergent, do not use bleach, fabric softener, or dryer sheets, only launder with other microfiber, and tumble dry on low heat or no heat.