

## How Does Steam Sterilization Work?

By: Pamela H Caudell, RN, CNOR, CSPDS, ACSP

### Objectives:

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of steam sterilization.

Describe some of the factors that impact the effectiveness of sterilization.

Explain what the most frequent reason for sterilization failure is and what must be done to correct it.

Steam sterilization is the most commonly used sterilization system in the world. Steam is easy to produce as well as being a cheap commodity. Does that necessarily make it the best? Not in all cases, but for the majority of instrumentation used in ORs today, the answer is yes. There are distinct advantages to using steam.

1. It is the preferred way of method destroying microorganisms.
2. It is non-toxic.
3. Kills spores.
4. Inexpensive.
5. Cycles are fast.

What about the disadvantages? Just as there are advantages there are also disadvantages. One very large disadvantage is steam can be hazardous to certain pieces of equipment. This is because of the heat generated and by moisture which is what steam is. Another disadvantage involves the purity of the steam. If the steam is not pure, there may be impurities

that get into the very small lumens and block them. You might also find pitting or metal discoloration on instruments that were exposed to steam that wasn't pure. Care must be taken also when loading the cartages to the steam has the ability to get into every nook and cranny of the package loading that time to be considered. It doesn't do any good to have the best steam in the world if it can't get to what needs to be sterilized.

Do you know what some of the things are that can affect the sterilization process? Let's take off cleaning first. What do you know about sterilization as it pertains to cleaning? First rule, if the item is not clean, it can not be properly sterilized. Without this first step, nothing else matters, the item will not be sterile. Conditions left to the manufacturer being on the item must be present. In other words, are all the parameters for sterilization present? For instance, is the temperature appropriate to the type of sterilizer being used? If it's a gravity air displacement sterilizer, the temp should be 250 F or 121 C. If it's a prevac sterilizer, the temp should be 272 F or 134 C. How about humidity? Approximately 93% humidity and a water vapor in the steam of no more than 2% is considered the standard. What about

pressure? The psi (pounds per square inch) means that within the chamber of the autoclave the system is building up a head of steam which calculates into pressure. If you are using a prevac autoclave, the psi needs to be at 27 pounds in order to force the steam into the packs to sterilize the items inside the pack. This is considered to be saturated steam. In other words, the steam entering the sterilizer is considered to be a moist steam, ergo the need to have 2 1/2 liquid water. More than that and what you get are wet packs. Less than that and what you get is superheated steam which causes a sterilizer failure due to lack of heat transfer to the load contents. You must also be on the alert for any air pockets inside the chamber as steam cannot sterilize through air. That's why your sterilizers have a mechanism so that at the beginning of each cycle, all the air is removed from the chamber before sterilization cycles start. Steam sterilizers date back to the early days of formal healthcare. Before the advent of the steam sterilizer, instruments were generally, if you were lucky, dropped in a pan of hot water to be cleaned/sterilized. Charles Chamberland invented the first real steam sterilizer in 1880. This steam sterilizer

# How Does Steam Sterilization Work By Pamela H Caudell

**Rachel Sandford**



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