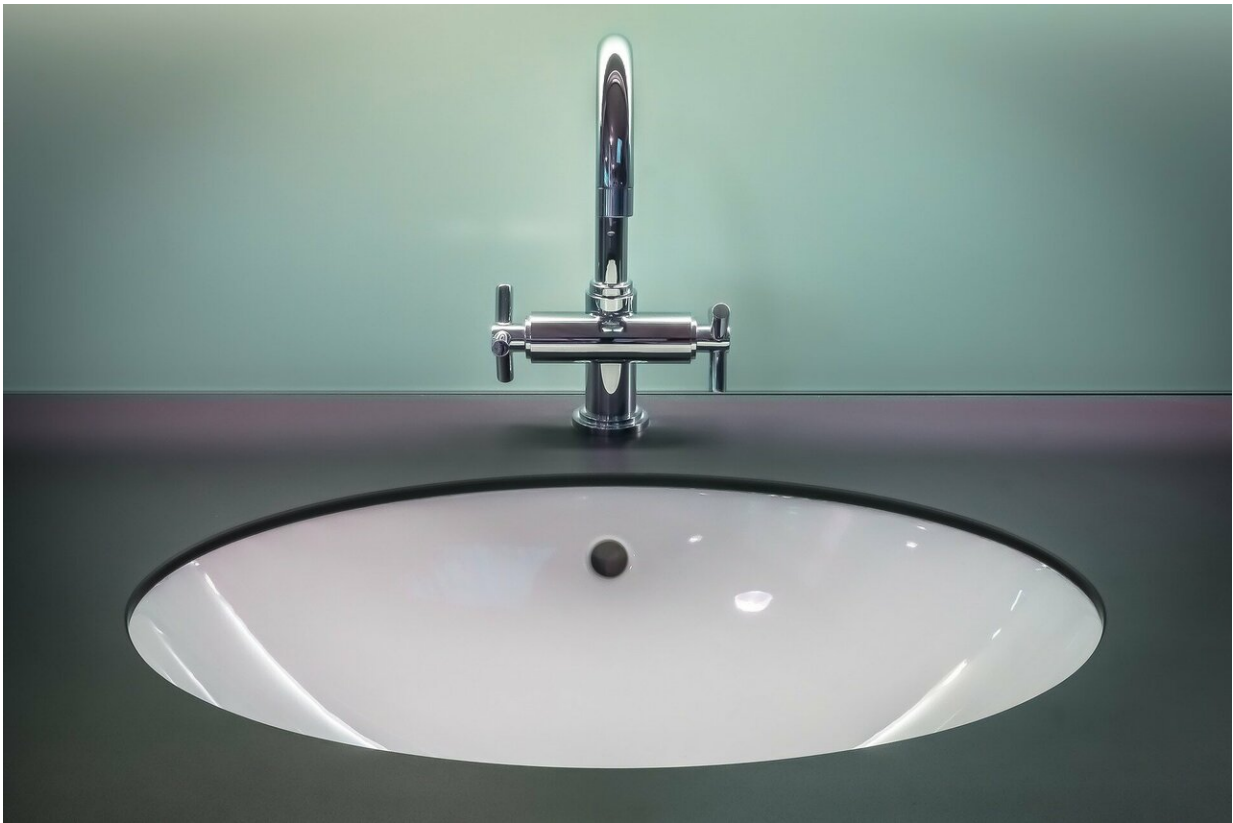


# Are portable potties safe during the pandemic?

September 22 2020, by Nicole Hvidsten, Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

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When you gotta go, you gotta go. Portable restrooms are nearby, but are they safe in the COVID era? We asked a sanitation expert.

Q. Has demand increased?

A. Demand for portable sanitation equipment has changed during the pandemic. With so many outdoor events canceled, fewer restrooms are needed for things like fairs, concerts and weddings. Demand has gone up considerably on job sites, where existing OSHA laws and new guidance for the pandemic have required more restrooms, hand-wash facilities and more frequent cleaning. We have also seen a surge in requests for equipment in places where indoor restrooms might be closed.

Q. Do you recommend users take any extra precautions during the COVID era?

A. For decades the CDC has said, "Hand washing is a do-it-yourself vaccine." We strongly recommend that people wash their hands frequently, and especially after using the restroom.

Q. Since they don't flush, are they safe?

A. Actually, one could argue that portable restrooms are safer because they don't flush. There is a good deal of research that shows flushing creates an aerosol that spreads the contents of a toilet into the air in a room. Many [public toilets](#) do not have lids, so you can't close the lid to avoid that. The waste in a portable toilet is safe as long as it is below the blue water in the tank. That blue water contains chemicals that kill bacteria and viruses, and without a flush it isn't getting into the air in the unit.

Q. Is it difficult to ventilate portable potties?

A. Each portable restroom has a ventilation pipe and screens around the top of the unit to assist with air flow. Under normal conditions ventilation is not a problem. Like any small, non-air-conditioned space,

it will be harder to keep conditions pleasant in extreme heat when there is no breeze.

Q. Lid open or closed?

A. It really is better to close the lid. That keeps the odors in the tank and forces them out the ventilation pipe. Users can grab a bit of toilet paper to protect their hand when they raise and lower the lid.

Q. What's in the tanks to keep odors down?

A. The chemicals in portable toilets break down the organic material, kill bacteria and viruses that may live in the tank and address the odor. That happens both by breaking down the sources of the odor and by masking them with a more pleasant fragrance. The key is making sure the units are serviced on the right schedule. If the unit is overused so that waste is above the water line, or if the chemical hasn't been replaced within about seven days, odors will happen.

Q. How often are public portable restrooms, such as those at parks and beaches, cleaned and emptied?

A. Pre-COVID our standards called for them to be cleaned after 200 uses or at least once a week, whichever came first. Since COVID, we have recommended more frequent cleaning and pumping of the units. The public can check out the recommendations for their situation in the free publication "COVID-19 Guidelines for Portable Sanitation." It's on our website at [psai.org](https://psai.org).

Q. What changes has the industry had to make because of COVID?

A. Perhaps the most striking one is that workers and the public are taking hand washing much more seriously. Before COVID-19 it was

common that someone would rent a portable restroom but decline to get hand-washing facilities. That's no longer the case. We also see increased service requests, and a willingness by customers to help keep the units clean by wiping them down inside more often. Manufacturers in our industry are working night and day to produce enough sanitizer and build enough hand-wash equipment to meet demand. And, of course, our workers have had to increase their PPE to stay safe.

Q. Do people really tip them over or is that just an old wives' tale?

A. It can happen, but it's extremely uncommon when someone is in the unit. We usually hear about it occurring outside a stadium when people have had too much to drink, a weird sense of humor, or anger at fans of the other team.

Q. Pandemic aside, are there situations when you should avoid portable restrooms, from weather to underlying health conditions?

A. When nature calls, there is no reason to avoid a portable restroom unless you would also avoid any other public restroom. If it is extremely windy - like tornado-level winds - you should be in your basement, not a portable restroom anyway.

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