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Keeping sterile sets dry; the 25-pound tray

by Ray Taurasi

Q I work in an ambulatory surgical center and am responsible for operating room (OR) staff education as well as quality assurance for the surgical processing and sterilization area. We have had recurring issues with some wetness in our sterilized instruments sets. My nurse manager has asked that I develop some brief educational sessions on some key causes and measures that can help minimize moisture in our sterile sets. This is not my forte. Could you please provide some advice and/or key points that you think I should include in my presentation? Also, I would like to put together a checklist that I could post to remind staff of the proper steps they need to take to avoid moisture.

A I suggest the following actions could help prevent the occurrence of wetness in sterilized instruments sets and packages:

- Precondition the load by placing instruments inside the warm steam sterilizer with the door closed for 10 to 15 minutes before starting the cycle.
- Line instrument tray or basket with a cellulose tray liner.
- Place a cellulose wicking material between the bottom of instrument basket and packaging material or containment device.
- Minimize density and metal mass divide sets containing excessively heavy or dense instruments into two parts.
- Do not use plastic paper peel pouches inside of wrapped or containerized sets.
- Do not overload sterilizer.

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- Minimize the use of plastic or non-absorbent packaging materials or aids.
- Properly position instruments in sets in a manner that will prevent holding of moisture.
- Be certain to clean the sterilizer chamber drain thoroughly, keeping it free of lint and other debris.
- Strive to keep the instrument set weight at no more than 25 pounds — heavy sets are difficult to dry without increasing dry time.
- Maintain a record of all wet loads or instruments sets:
 - Note load contents.
 - Identify wet sets and packages.
 - Note day and time of cycle.
 - Confirm proper cycle parameters were achieved.
 - What were the results of sterilizer monitors, CI, BI, BD etc.? (This information may be useful in identifying patterns in failure and corrective actions required.)
 - Always follow the instructions for use (IFUs) of the medical device, sterilizer, containment and packaging manufacturers.

Q I understand that the instruments in a tray should not weigh more than a total of 25 pounds. This, however, is not always something that can be realistically achieved. We even have some single instruments that in and of themselves weigh close to or more than 25 pounds. I have been an OR nurse for many years and sets heavier than 25 pounds have been used with no problems. I have monitored some of our heavier sets and instruments with multiple BIs, CIs and even culturing. Every test we have conducted has passed and we are confident that our sterilization process has been effective. So I see no problem with what we are doing. There is more to sterilization than a weight number. There is no way that every set can be no more than 25 pounds. Would you agree? What are we supposed to do?

A Both the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) and the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) recommend that instrument sets and trays prepared for sterilization not exceed 25 pounds. This weight limit includes the combined weight of the instruments, tray, basket, containment device and packaging materials. You are correct in saying that there is a lot more to successful sterilization than just the weight of an instrument set but this recommended weight limit of 25 pounds is also about more than effective sterilization. There are employee safety issues associated with the 25-pound weight limit to consider as well. Excessive weight increases the risk of ergonomic injury to personnel lifting and handling these sets. Also, excessive instrument weights and metal mass are prone to moisture retention and are a contributing factor to wetness in sterilized packages. Internal moisture can wick through package providing a conduit for contaminant penetration. There will obviously be times when it will be necessary to process and sterilize heavier instruments and sets. In these instances, measures should be taken to effectively manage this process for sterility assurance and worker safety. **HPN**

Ray Taurasi is Eastern Regional Director of Clinical Sales and Services for [Healthmark Industries](#). His healthcare career spans over three decades as an Administrator, Educator, Technologist and Consultant. He is a member of AORN, AHA, SGNA, AAMI and a past president of IAHCMM. Taurasi has been a faculty member of numerous colleges teaching in the divisions of business administration and health sciences.



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