Why Clorox Wipes Are Still So Hard to Find
Shortage isn’t improving; ‘within 30-45 minutes they’re gone’

By Sharon Terlep
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Toilet paper is back on shelves and hand sanitizer is easier to find, but one item remains as elusive as ever: disinfectant wipes.

Clorox Co. CLX 1.59% and Lysol maker Reckitt Benckiser Group RBGLY 0.24% PLC have seen sales of sanitizing wipes more than double in the past two months amid the coronavirus pandemic, according to Nielsen. But while makers of other hard-to-find staples are catching up with demand, the producers of Clorox, Lysol and private-label wipes are as far behind as ever. Clorox said it doesn’t expect to catch up until summer, while Reckitt Benckiser said it is unsure when supplies will replenish.

“We’re shipping canisters of wipes every day to our customers, and within 30-45 minutes they’re gone from shelves,” Clorox finance chief Kevin Jacobsen said in an interview. “Demand has outstripped what anybody could have imagined.”

Clorox has increased production of disinfectant products by 40%, but sales have stretched to five times the normal level at times during the spread of Covid-19, Mr. Jacobsen said. U.S. sales of disinfectant wipes were up 146% for the eight-week period ended March 25 compared with a year ago, according to Nielsen.

While wipes are in short supply, disinfectant sprays, surface cleaners and other coronavirus-fighting cleaning products are selling out as well. Many household and personal-care products, from paper towels to cold medicine to baby wipes, are also in high demand, though aren’t as tough to find as disinfectant wipes.

Wipes are especially coveted for their convenience at a time when Americans spend their days wiping down homes with disinfectants in an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Toilet paper is also a hot seller, but has slowly become more available as consumers stockpile less and factories that were flush with the product worked to accelerate shipments. Hand sanitizer, another convenient cleaner, is now being produced by many dozens of companies new to the business, from fragrance makers to breweries to traditional personal-care companies.

Disinfectant wipes can’t be made as readily as hand sanitizer. The process combines fabric wipes with the cleaning solution, and the Environmental Protection Agency has in place criteria for cleaners to be considered effective for use against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19.

And unlike toilet paper, which is ubiquitous in homes and businesses, only about half of American households stocked disinfectant wipes before the pandemic, Clorox’s Mr. Jacobsen said. That led to an even more dramatic demand spike as current wipe users consumed a much higher volume while new buyers sought them out.

Clorox said it is running plants around the clock to try to meet demand. The company is calling on third-party manufacturers and has reduced the variety of products it sells to simplify manufacturing. The company, for instance, halted sales of a new compostable Clorox wipe, which wasn’t a disinfecting product, and is using that capacity to make traditional wipes instead.

Clorox also is making long-term capital investments with the expectation that demand for cleaning products, and wipes specifically, will remain high after this initial surge passes and Americans remain focused on cleaning. Clorox plans to add disinfectant-making lines at a factory in Atlanta that has extra space.

Truly catching up with customer demand will likely take until summer, Mr. Jacobsen said.

Reckitt Benckiser, which sells Dettol disinfectant products in addition to Lysol, has increased capacity and simplified its product line by eliminating some offerings in an effort to meet demand, a spokeswoman for the U.K.-based company said.

Lysol, in a statement, apologized to customers for not being able to deliver enough product and said it is working to restock as quickly as possible. “We are experiencing unprecedented and accelerated demand,” the company said.