

Making the green choice – homemade cleaning recipes and tips

Homemade cleaners can be less toxic. With some simple, reliable recipes and clean, empty containers, you can make your own less-toxic cleaners right at home using familiar household ingredients. The following is a list of basic ingredients, along with their common cleaning uses.

Ingredients:

Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda). This mild alkali powder can be used for a variety of household cleaning purposes, such as removing stains from tile, glass, oven doors, and china; cleaning the inside of refrigerators; helping to absorb odors; and removing baked-on food from pans. It also acts as a stain remover for fruit juices and other mild acids.

Borax. A powder or crystalline salt sold in most grocery stores, borax is a water softener and sanitizer. It makes an excellent freshener when added to laundry and is an all-around deodorizer.

Castile soap. A mild soap available in liquid or bar form that can be used for general-purpose cleaning. It was once made from olive oil, but now may include other vegetable oils as well.

Cream of tartar (potassium bitartrate). This common baking ingredient is a mild acid that can be used as a sink and bathtub stain remover. It can also be used to remove spots from aluminum cookware.

Hydrogen peroxide. A mild alternative to chlorine bleach that can be used for stain removal and mild bleaching and killing germs. Available in drug stores and supermarkets.

Lemon juice. This familiar ingredient can be used to lighten stains and cut grease. It can also be used to remove tarnish can be used on brass, copper, bronze and aluminum (not to be used on silver).

Washing soda (carbonate of soda). A stronger alternative to baking soda, washing soda can be used as a water softener in conjunction with laundry detergents (gloves are recommended as it may irritate skin; not to be used with silks, woolens or vinyl).

White vinegar. Good for a variety of household cleaning tasks, vinegar may be used to help kill germs and deodorize, remove some carpet stains, and clean coffeemakers, chrome, cookware, and countertops. It can also be used to unclog drains. Note that while white vinegar has a slight scent while wet, when dry, it leaves no odor. However, don't use it on acetate fabrics, such as in some tablecloths, because it can dissolve the fibers.

To learn more about how to use these ingredients and others to make your own cleaners, consult the recipes below, which were adapted from the Children's Health Environmental Coalition's [Recipes for Safer Cleaners](#). [Please note that *Consumer Reports* has not tested these recipes]

KITCHEN

- Countertops.** For a "soft scrub," mix baking soda and liquid soap until you get a consistency you like. The amounts don't have to be perfect. Make only as much as you need, as it dries up quickly.
- Ovens.** To clean extra-greasy ovens, mix together 1 cup baking soda and 1/4 cup of washing soda, then add enough water to make a paste; apply the paste to oven surfaces and let soak overnight. The next morning, lift off soda mixture and grime; rinse surfaces well (gloves are recommended as washing soda may irritate skin).
- Microwave ovens.** These can be cleaned with a paste made from 3 to 4 tablespoons of baking soda mixed with water. Scrub on with a sponge and rinse.
- Cutting boards.** Sanitize them by spraying with vinegar and then with 3 percent hydrogen peroxide. Keep the liquids in separate spray bottles and use them one at a time. It doesn't matter which one you use first, but both together are much more effective than either one alone.

BATHROOM

- Tub and tile cleaner.** Mix 1 2/3 cup baking soda, 1/2 cup liquid soap, and 1/2 cup water. Then, as the last step, add 2 tablespoons vinegar (if you add the vinegar too early it will react with the baking soda). Immediately apply, wipe, and scrub.
- A good all-purpose sanitizer.** 2 teaspoons borax, 4 tablespoons vinegar, and 3 to 4 cups hot water in a spray bottle. For extra cleaning power, add 1/4 teaspoon liquid soap to the mixture.
- Toilet bowl.** Pour 1 cup of borax into the toilet before going to bed. In the morning, scrub and flush. For an extra-strength cleaner, add 1/4 cup vinegar to the borax.
- Drains.** Prevent clogged drains by using hair and food traps. To de-grease and sweeten sink and tub drains, pour

1/2 cup of baking soda down drain, followed by 1 cup vinegar; let bubble for 15 minutes; rinse with hot water. You might have to repeat the procedure more than once or leave the baking soda and vinegar to “cook” overnight.

LIVING ROOM

- General dusting.** Best done with a damp cloth: Dry dusting simply stirs up dust and moves it around.
- Furniture polish.** Mix olive oil and vinegar in a one-to-one ratio and polish with a soft cloth. Or look in a health-food store for food-grade linseed oil, often called omega-3 or flaxseed oil, rather than the type found in hardware stores to finish furniture. Linseed oil sold for furniture use often contains dangerous petroleum distillates to speed evaporation.
- Windows.** Put 3 tablespoons vinegar per 1 quart water in a spray bottle. Some recommend using half vinegar and half water. For extra-dirty windows try this: 1/2 teaspoon liquid soap, 3 tablespoons vinegar, and 2 cups of water. Shake well. The best way to get streak-free windows? Use newspaper instead of paper towels to wipe them.

METAL POLISH

- Brass, copper, bronze and aluminum.** To remove tarnish, rub metal with sliced lemons. For tough jobs, sprinkle baking soda on the lemon, then rub.
- Sterling silver.** Put a sheet of aluminum foil into a plastic or glass bowl. Sprinkle the foil with salt and baking soda, then fill the bowl with warm water. Soak your silver in the bowl, and the tarnish will migrate to the aluminum foil. Rinse and dry the silver, then buff it with a soft cloth.

AIR FRESHENER

- A simple recipe of 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1 teaspoon vinegar (or lemon juice), and 2 cups hot water in a spray bottle can be spritzed in the air to remove odors.

FLOORS AND CARPETS

- Linoleum.** For extra grease-cutting, try this formula: 1/4 cup washing soda with 1 tablespoon of liquid soap, 1/4 cup vinegar, and 2 gallons hot water. Put the washing soda in the bucket first and add the liquid ingredients; that way the soda won't splash out. Caution: Do not use this formula on waxed floors.
- Sanitize floors.** Add 2 gallons of hot water to 1/2 cup of borax. Put the borax in the bucket first, then add water slowly to avoid splashing.
- Wood floors.** Add 1 cup of vinegar per pail of hot water.
- Carpeting and rugs.** To soak up and eliminate odors, sprinkle baking soda over the surface of the carpet and let it stand for 15 to 30 minutes before vacuuming.

LAUNDRY

- Laundry brightener.** Add 1/2 cup of strained lemon juice during the rinse cycle.
- Fabric rinse.** Add 1/4 cup of white vinegar during the washing machine's rinse cycle to remove detergent completely from clothes, eliminating that scratchy feel. (Note: This will not leave your clothes smelling like vinegar.)
- Detergent booster.** To reduce the amount of laundry detergent you need to use (especially if you have hard water) add baking soda or washing soda. These minerals soften the water, which increases the detergent's power. For liquid detergent, add 1/2 cup of soda at the beginning of the wash. For powdered detergent, add 1/2 cup of soda during the rinse cycle.
- Bleach.** Use hydrogen peroxide instead of chlorine bleach.
- Dry cleaning.** Many delicate “dry clean only” items can be washed at home by hand. In general, it's best to use cool water and a mild liquid soap. Squeeze or wring gently and lay flat to dry.

MOLD

- Use a stiff brush, a non-ammonia detergent, and hot water to scrub mold off nonporous surfaces. Use a stiff-bristle toothbrush to get between tiles. You can also use a paste of baking soda and water. Don't rinse. And remember to wear gloves and a protective mask, since mold spores can be inhaled.