



Children's Health Environmental Coalition HealthHouse

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Recipes for Safer Cleaners *by Pamela Lundquist*

Children's Health Environmental Coalition

Cleaning products can contain many dangerous chemicals, which are usually not listed on the labels. Some of the hazards are mentioned in [The Cleaning Blues](#).

One of the easiest ways to protect your family from harm is to stop using cleaning products found in stores and start making your own. In fact, it's easy, far less expensive and just as effective. Most ingredients for homemade cleaners can be found in your kitchen.

Below, you'll find recipes for [kitchen](#), [bathroom](#), and [living room cleaning](#), as well as recipes for [metal polishes](#), [air fresheners](#), [floors and carpets](#), [laundry](#) and [mold](#).

Keep these points in mind:

- Buy a few high quality spray bottles that you can use many times. Bottles with ounce measurements on them are especially useful for measuring and mixing.
- Be sure to label your mixtures to avoid confusion.
- **Liquid soap** means *castile soap*, a mild soap once made from olive oil, but now may include other vegetable oils as well. Coconut oil soaps are another good alternative to petroleum-based soaps.
- **Vinegar** means *distilled white vinegar*, available by the gallon at your supermarket. Note that while vinegar has a slight scent while wet, when dry, it leaves no odor.
- **Washing soda** and **borax** are minerals related to *baking soda*, but are stronger and more caustic. Though natural, both washing soda and borax can irritate skin, so use gloves. Borax can be toxic when swallowed, so keep it out of children's reach at all times. Both of these items can be found in your supermarket's laundry aisle.
- ALL cleaners, whether homemade or store bought, and cleaning ingredients should be kept safely away out of the reach of children and pets in locked cabinets or high places.
- You can also buy safer, environmentally friendly cleaning products, too. You'll find them in natural foods stores and some supermarkets. Some can be ordered online. See [CHEC's Safer Products Store](#).

KITCHEN

- **Countertops:** For a "soft scrub," mix together 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.

- **Microwave ovens** can be cleaned with a paste of 3-4 tablespoons baking soda mixed with water. Scrub on with a sponge and rinse.
- **Cutting boards:** Disinfect them by spraying with vinegar and then with 3% hydrogen peroxide (available in drug stores). 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.

Kitchens are one place where disinfecting is recommended for other select items like utensils and countertops. Please see [Alternatives to Antibacterials & Disinfectants: Safer Ways to Keep Germs at Bay](#) for more information.

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 disinfectant:** 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 whole procedure more than once or leave the baking soda and vinegar to "cook" overnight.

LIVING ROOM

- **General dusting** is best done with a damp cloth. Dry dusting simply stirs up dust and moves it around. Also, try 1 teaspoon olive oil per 1/2 cup vinegar. Mix together in a bowl and apply with a soft cloth.
- **Furniture polish:** Mix olive oil and vinegar in a one-to-one ratio and polish with a soft cloth. Or look 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. Just soak your silver in the bowl and the tarnish will migrate to the aluminum foil. Finally, rinse, dry and buff your silver with a soft cloth.

AIR FRESHENER

Vinegar and baking soda are great room fresheners. Vinegar deodorizes, while baking soda absorbs odors. 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. Zeolite, like baking soda, absorbs odor. Set out either in bathrooms and closets. See [How to Freshen Indoor Air Naturally](#) for more natural solutions to stale indoor air.

FLOORS AND CARPETS

- **Vacuuming** is an important part of floor maintenance. We recommend using a machine with a HEPA filter,

which traps very small particles that are otherwise blown back into the room in the vacuum's exhaust. [Consumer Reports](#), which ranks appliances, has found that some vacuum cleaners without HEPA filters were also effective. No matter what kind of vacuum cleaner you use, be sure pass over carpet several times and more in heavy traffic areas.

- **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 — this way the soda won't splash out. Caution: Do not use this formula on waxed floors! For an extra polish, combine 6 tablespoons of cornstarch per cup of water in a bucket.
- **Disinfect floors:** Add 2 gallons of hot water to 1/2 cup of borax. (Put the borax in the bucket first, then add water to avoid splashing.)
- **Wood floors:** Vinegar is a natural disinfectant, and it pulls dirt from wood. After a large party, I used 1 cup vinegar per pail of hot water to clean my wood floors — the smell disappeared immediately. You can also use it on other types of floors — it's a gentle yet very effective floor cleaner.
- **Carpeting And Rugs:** Regular vacuuming will help keep carpets their cleanest. Sprinkle baking soda over the surface of the carpet and let it stand for 15 – 30 minutes before vacuuming to soak up and eliminate odors. CHEC recommends against the use of chemical carpet cleaners because of health concerns associated with their ingredients. See [Are Carpet Cleaners Safe?](#) If you want to steam clean your rug, use plain water and make sure it dries thoroughly. For other carpet cleaning tips, see [How to Clean Carpets Without Dangerous Chemicals](#).

LAUNDRY

- **Laundry brightener:** Add 1/2 cup of strained lemon juice to the rinse cycle.
- **Fabric rinse:** Add 1/4 cup of vinegar to the washing machine's rinse cycle to remove detergent completely from clothes, eliminating that scratchy feel. This will not leave your clothes smelling like vinegar!
- **Detergent booster:** To reduce the amount of laundry detergent you need to use, 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. See [Greenwashing: How to Dry Clean Only Without Perc](#) for more information.

MOLD & MILDEW

If you discover mold and mildew in your house, first find the source of moisture and stop it. It's pointless to clean mold if it's only going to return! Read more about [How To Prevent Mold Exposure](#).

- **To clean mold:** Remember to wear gloves and a facemask, since mold spores can be inhaled. Use a stiff brush, a non-ammonia detergent and hot water to scrub mold off of non-porous surfaces. Use a stiff bristle toothbrush to get in between tiles. You can also use a paste of baking soda and water. Don't rinse.

Resources:

[Clean and Green](#) (Library Journal, 1990), by Annie Berthold Bond.

[The Safe Shopper's Bible](#) (Macmillan, 1995), by David Steinman and Samuel S. Epstein.

See also:

[How to Clean with 5 Basic Tools](#)

[Antibacterials & Disinfectants: Are They Necessary?](#)

[Fragrances in Cleaning Products, Fabric Softeners and Laundry Detergents](#)

Look for safer product alternatives in [CHEC's Safer Products Store](#).