

# Tackling grime the natural way

We compared the cleaning powers of lemon, vinegar and other store-cupboard ingredients with shop-bought products. The results may surprise you...

## HOW THE ALTERNATIVES WORK

**Lemon juice** is a natural bleaching agent and disinfectant. If you're buying from a supermarket, a lemon will cost you about 16p.

**Distilled white vinegar** is acidic so cuts through grease and grime. Be careful on delicate surfaces. A bottle of vinegar will cost 65p for 568ml.

**Bicarbonate of soda** is mildly abrasive, making it good for scrubbing, and it's also an excellent deodoriser. Bicarbonate of soda costs 44p for 200g.

Fifty years ago houses were kept perfectly clean without any help from the likes of Cif, Flash and Mr Muscle. Instead, the cupboards under grandma's sink were full of lemons, vinegar, soda crystals and bicarbonate of soda.

If you've been watching Aggie and Kim on Channel 4's *How clean is your house*, you'll notice that they have revived some of these traditional methods. 'You don't need to use lots of

different cleaning products,' says Aggie MacKenzie. 'I worry about the effects on the environment of using so many chemicals.'

We wanted to know how these 'alternative' cleaning remedies measured up to chemical-based products from leading brands so we tried them out on several common cleaning tasks. Where possible, we also tested an eco-friendly cleaner from a leading brand. Tests were carried out at an independent lab

with three scientists scrubbing and polishing their way through each task.

In general, the alternatives did just as well as – or sometimes better than – the shop-bought cleaners. However, they weren't always as easy to use and, in some cases, they were more expensive. But if you want to help the environment – and your health – try picking up a lemon instead of a proprietary cleaner next time you tackle the housework. ■

## Chemicals in household cleaners

By law, manufacturers of household cleaners must label any products that harm health or the environment. But they don't have to specify which chemicals they use. Environmental groups are concerned about the harmful chemicals found in many household cleaning products. Mary Taylor, Friends of the Earth's Safer Chemicals Campaigner, told us: 'Some of these chemicals have been shown to accumulate

in the body and in the natural environment, potentially causing problems for generations to come.'

Multi-surface cleaners, for example, can contain endocrine disruptors that affect the pituitary gland, causing birth defects and abnormalities in the reproductive system. And volatile organic compounds found in some cleaning products and air fresheners can cause asthma in children.

Chemicals in cleaning products can also have adverse effects on the environment. Chlorine-based bleach, for example, gets into the water system, where

it can contaminate wildlife. And half-used containers in landfill sites can leak chemicals into the soil and water table.

For more information on the effects of certain chemicals, and which brands Greenpeace considers to be the worst offenders, visit the chemical home link on [www.greenpeace.org.uk](http://www.greenpeace.org.uk).

If you haven't got time to mix your own alternative cleaners, but still want to be kind to yourself and the

environment, consider using shop-bought eco-friendly cleaning products, which are based on vegetables rather than oil. Mary Taylor, from Friends of the Earth, told us: 'People can minimise their exposure to risks by using environmentally friendly products when they can.' Popular brands include Ecover (available in most supermarkets), Bio-D, Clear Spring and Little Green Shop.

Eco-friendly products such as Ecover are widely available



## Windows & mirrors

**Shop bought:** Windolene spray (£1.06 for 500ml); Ecover Squirteco All Purpose Cleaner (£1.99 for 500ml).

**Alternative:** Mix one part distilled white vinegar to nine parts water. Apply to your smeary windows or mirrors then buff up with pieces of crunched-up newspaper.

**Verdict:** The alternative cleaned on a par with Windolene and Squirteco but lost marks for ease of use. Our testers also complained that the alternative mixture had an unpleasant smell compared with the other two. Windolene was the cheapest, at 0.1p per use, vinegar was 2p, and Ecover was the most expensive at 6p.

**Testers' tip:** 'To make it easier to use, make a batch of the mixture and keep it in a spray bottle. Also, wear gloves, as the newsprint leaves your hands black'.

Winners: vinegar/  
Windolene

## Kettles

**Shop bought:** Oust kettle descaler (£1.55 for 150ml).

**Alternative:** Add half water, half distilled white vinegar to kettle and boil.

**Verdict:** Vinegar descales just as well as Oust and is cheaper – 11p per use compared with 60p. However, it gives off an unpleasant smell.



Winner: vinegar

**Testers' tip:** 'After descaling, boil fresh water in the kettle several times. This will get rid of the smell and taste of vinegar.'

## Removing limescale from taps



Winner: lemon

**Shop bought:** Limelite power spray (£2.49 for 500ml).

**Alternative:** Rub half a lemon over taps, leave to dry then buff up (chrome taps only).

**Verdict:** Here the alternative outshone

the Limelite spray, leaving taps 'very clean and shiny' according to our testers. Lemons cost more, though, at 8p per use compared with 0.1p for Limelite.

Our testers found the lemons a bit messy, but they are a great natural alternative.

## Microwaves

**Shop bought:** Flash All Purpose cleaner (£1.38 for 500ml); Ecover Squirteco All Purpose Cleaner (£1.99 for 500ml).

**Alternative:** Place a bowl of water and lemon juice/slices inside the microwave. Heat on high for three minutes until the water boils then wipe

away the dirt inside. This should loosen grease and dirt inside the microwave, making it easier to clean and leave it smelling fresher.

**Verdict:** All methods cleaned equally well, although the lemons were the least easy to use. At 6p per use, Ecover has the



Winner: Ecover Squirteco

advantage of being the cheapest and easiest to use, as well as being friendly to the environment. Both Flash and the lemon cost 8p per use.

## Carpets



Winners: lemon/  
soda water

**Shop bought:** Vanish Oxiaction Carpet and Upholstery cleaner (£2.98 for 500ml).

**Alternative:** For red wine, grass and blood, squeeze lemon juice on to the stain and wipe with a damp cloth. For coffee, pour soda water on to the stain then blot with a cloth.

**Verdict:** Testers said lemon juice did an 'exceedingly good job' at removing red wine. Vanish needed two applications to match it. Lemon was also effective on blood and grass stains, whereas Vanish wasn't. Soda water proved very good at removing the coffee stain – far better than Vanish, which was only slightly better after a second application. Vanish cost 2p per use, and lemon and soda water cost 0.16p per use, and they were all equally easy to use.

## Toilet

**Shop bought:** Domestos Active Gel (99p for 750ml); Ecover Toilet Cleaner (£1.28 for 750ml).

**Alternative:** To remove stains, sprinkle bicarbonate of soda into the bowl, add distilled white vinegar and clean with paper towels or cloths.

**Verdict:** All three methods produced excellent results. Domestos (2p per use) uses a hydrogen-peroxide-based bleaching agent to kill germs, which is gentler than chlorine on the environment. However, it is classed as an

irritant. Of the remaining two, Ecover Toilet Cleaner was the cheaper (5p) and easier-to-use option. Bicarbonate of soda and white vinegar cost 15p per use.

**Testers' tip:** 'When fizzing has stopped, rub marks with a cloth to get good results. Flush the toilet before sprinkling bicarbonate of soda as it then sticks to the walls better and doesn't just end up in the water.'

Winner: Ecover  
toilet cleaner

