

# Ceramic Tile Cleaning Tips



## Builder Bulletin 284

by

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This Builder Bulletin combines additional information related to the Reader's question shown on page 2. First the Reader's question and the reply are provided. Following the question and answer is the additional information related to that particular question.

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## Removing Mildew from Grout

**DEAR TIM:** It is a long, long story but the bottom line is that my ceramic tile shower is a mess. There is mildew everywhere and other really tough stains that are nearly impossible to remove. Is there a way to make the white grout look like new? It seems that the mildew has penetrated deeply into the grout. What can I do to restore the shower to its original condition? What can I do to prevent this from happening again? Molly S., Orangeburg, SC

**DEAR MOLLY:** Six weeks ago a friend of mine had the same problem. One day while we were at the swimming pool, he said he tried many off the shelf cleaners and products to clean his tile shower. He was not satisfied with the results and was ready to tear out the tile and grout and start over. I told him that he had the necessary cleaning products in his house the entire time and had overlooked them. When I told him the solution to his problem, he couldn't believe it. Two weeks ago he said his shower looks fabulous. Ah, another satisfied customer!

To restore your ceramic tile shower to near-perfect condition, you are going to need several things. Get a new scrub brush that has stiff nylon or plastic bristles, a roll of paper towels, a gallon of chlorine bleach, a gallon of white vinegar, a spray bathroom cleaner or ultra mild abrasive cleaner, and your birthday suit. The stains and dirt have taken months to accumulate. Don't think you are going to complete this job in 30 minutes or less. The entire process is going to take place over a period of hours and possibly several days.



The first thing to do is to use the scrub brush to remove as much mildew, dirt, soap film etc. as possible from the tile and grout. Get into the shower and scrub well using lots of water and plenty of cleaner. Rinse often and do whatever is necessary to make the tile surfaces shine like a mirror. Don't

worry that the grout is still gray with deeply embedded mildew. We will deal with that shortly.

After this cleaning process, you will probably have some dull stains that won't budge. These are very likely hard water deposits. You will remove those using some paper towels and white vinegar. Saturate some paper towels with the vinegar and place them over the hard water stains. Do this on the floor and any vertical surfaces. The wet paper towels will readily cling to vertical surfaces. Vinegar is a very mild acid and it works slowly but efficiently to dissolve the alkaline water deposits.

Get dressed or put on your robe and go relax for a while. Stop back every hour to make sure the towels are still wet with vinegar. Pull away the towel and scrub the deposits. They may completely wash away. If they do not, pour fresh vinegar on the towels to continue the cleansing chemical reaction. Heavy deposits can take up to eight hours or so to completely melt away. The trick is to keep fresh vinegar on the towels.

Once you have all of the hard water deposits removed, clean the shower again to remove all traces of vinegar. It is now time to attack any residual mildew that has stained the grout. You are going to use the pure chlorine bleach and the remaining paper towels to accomplish this task. Saturate as many towels as necessary and put these in contact with the mildew stained grout. It can take hours and possibly days to bleach out all of the mildew in the grout. Be careful not to splash the chlorine bleach in your eyes or on any fabrics or carpets. It can harm you and it removes color from dyed fabrics.

If you are allergic to chlorine bleach or the chlorine fumes bother you, use oxygen bleach to remove mildew. You use the same techniques as described above, but it just might take a little longer. Oxygen bleach is color and fabric safe. It is also excellent for people who have septic systems. Chlorine bleach that escapes from the tub or shower into the drain system can kill beneficial bacteria in the septic tank. Oxygen bleach actually helps this bacteria!

To prevent the staining problem in your shower, it helps to understand mildew. It is an organism that requires food and water to live. Showers and

bath areas provide the moisture and you provide the food every time you use soap, shampoo, cream rinse, etc. Even the dirt and oils you wash from your skin and hair are food for mildew. If you minimize or eliminate the food and water, you can eliminate the mildew.

I feel the best way to defeat mildew is to clean the shower every two weeks. Every day after you have showered, use a plastic cup to pour clean water down the sides of the tile. Then use a squeegee to quickly wipe down the tiles directing as much water as possible to the shower drain. These two simple steps will remove a huge amount of food and water from the shower each day. When you get ready to leave the bathroom, open the shower curtain or shower door. Keep the bathroom door open as well. You want as much air to circulate in the shower as possible. This will dry all bath surfaces quickly and rob any microscopic mildew spores of water.

Message from Tim:

Years ago while researching a column about cleaning decks, I discovered the wonders of Oxygen Bleach. It is perhaps the 'greenest' cleaner I know of as it uses oxygen ions to break apart stains, dirt and odor molecules. There are no harsh chemicals, and it works on just about anything that is water washable.

I decided to create my own special blend using ingredients made in the USA. In fact, the raw materials in the active ingredient are food-grade quality registered with the FDA. I call my product [Stain Solver](#). I urge you to use it to help clean your ceramic tile and grout. You will be amazed at the results!

## **Bathroom Mildew Removal**

Ceramic tile is very attractive. Its glass-like surface makes it easy to keep clean, and you can do many decorative things with the material. It is the grout that causes people to become disenchanted with this building material. The porous grout is simply cement that looks like a sponge under a microscope.

All sorts of bacteria, organisms, etc. can soak into and hang out within the grout. The grout can also absorb and hold moisture. These qualities make it the perfect breeding ground for mildew. Well, it can run but it can't hide!

## **Siege Tactics**

If you are a military historian, you know that it is a common practice to try to starve out an enemy. Cut off their food or water supply and it is only a matter of time before they surrender or become too weak to fight effectively. Mildew is no different. If you want to stop or minimize mildew, then you need to cut off its water and food supply.

Once you have an outbreak of mildew in your home, it is tough to

totally eliminate it. Why? The mildew sends out airborne spores or seeds to start a new colony within your house. These spores can be just hanging out waiting for enough water and food to show up before they start to grow aggressively.

A common source of mildew spores is actually in the tub or shower drain. There is often a horrible black buildup of mildew and other bacteria on the side walls of the drainpipe that is between the chrome drain strainer and the trap where the standing water is. You can remove the entire buildup by cleaning it periodically with chlorine bleach.

## **Be a Doer!**

I have found that there are talkers out there and there are doers. Doers get things done. Talkers talk about it and frequently make excuses. It requires more discipline and work to be a doer. If you don't want mildew in your shower or tub area, you need to spend an extra 30 seconds each time you take a shower. You need to rinse off the wall and floor surfaces and then squeegee them to send as much water down the drain as possible.

You can buy decorative shower squeegees at better hardware stores. They even come with a handy holder that attaches in the shower area.

### **Regular Cleaning**

Mildew also needs food to eat. It doesn't take much to satisfy them, but unfortunately we offer them more than they need. Body oils, soaps, etc. all contain food for mildew and other bacteria. If you clean your ceramic shower or tub area on a regular basis, you cut off the food supply.

### **Regular Cleaners**

In a few moments you will read about regular cleaners you can buy at any grocery store. Most of these do a swell job of removing dirt, soap film, etc. from ceramic tile and grout surfaces. I didn't list every cleaner as there were simply too many. The next time you buy one, look at the ingredients. Keep in mind that the chemical name for chlorine bleach is sodium hypochlorite.

### **Hard Water Stains**

Friends of mine have complained that they can't get tough stains out of their shower. When they describe them to me, I realize they are not mildew but light colored hard water stains. These are some of the easiest things to deal with. Common white vinegar will dissolve hard water stains and deposits. It may take repeated soakings and scrubbing, but faucets, sinks, toilets, tile, etc. will look brand new.

### **Abrasive Cleaners**

Cleaners that contain mild abrasives can harm just about any surface, even ceramic tile. Use them often enough and they will de-gloss shiny glass surfaces. The abrasives are work savers. They help you to cut through dirt. If you clean on a regular basis, you usually don't need the help of the abrasives.

Never use abrasive cleaners on plastic, fiberglass, acrylic, etc. type surfaces. They will remove the gloss from these surfaces. Refer to the care instructions that usually come with products for safe cleaners.

## **Oxygen Bleach Tile Cleaner A Nontoxic Alternative**

Some people are sensitive to chlorine bleach or simply don't like its strong odor. They also are afraid of using it around any colored carpet, fabrics, etc. Just one drop that goes undetected can ruin a beautiful carpet, pair of pants or a shirt. There is a safer bleach - oxygen bleach!

Oxygen bleach can be used to kill and remove mildew. It doesn't work as fast as pure chlorine bleach, but it does work. It is nontoxic. When you mix the powdered oxygen bleach with water, it creates millions of oxygen ions, more water and soda ash. That is about as safe as you can get. The oxygen ion is the component that attacks the mildew.

Often ceramic tile grout becomes stained from hair dyes and other body care products. Oxygen bleach can soak into grout and remove many of these stains. The trick is to make a concentrated solution or even a paste and let it sit on the grout for hours or even overnight.

If you have mildewed camping gear, tarps, clothing, basically any

fabric, oxygen bleach will remove the mildew without hurting the fabric. It is also virtually color safe as well. The only dyes that are harmed by oxygen bleach are natural dyes like blueberry, grape or coffee. The vast majority of fabrics are dyed with synthetic dyes that are not affected by oxygen bleach.

So, where can you find oxygen bleach? It is not readily available in stores. I discovered it several years ago, while doing research on - of all things - deck cleaners! It turns out that oxygen bleach is also the absolute best cleaner for wood decks.

Some powdered deck cleaners contain oxygen bleach. I happen to sell it as well! My oxygen bleach product is called Stain Solver. It is 100% pure oxygen bleach. There are no additives, fillers, extenders, etc. in my product.

## **Ceramic Tile Cleaner Products**

The following list was compiled by a simple visit to a grocery store. These are all common off-the shelf cleaners that you have access to. I tried to go one step beyond just getting a name. I wanted to be able to tell you what the active ingredient

was in each product. As you might imagine, some products list the ingredients and others keep it pretty much a secret.

There is little worry when using these products on ceramic tile. Virtually all hard fired tile has a shiny glaze on it that is basically a very thin layer of glass. The cleaners will not harm this kind of tile. If you have a soft tile with a dull glaze or no glaze at all, then you need to test a cleaner to make sure it will not harm the tile.

The biggest danger that these cleaners pose is the threat of harming things that are near the tile. Some shower door finishes, faucet finishes and metal trim in fine bathrooms can be harmed by highly reactive cleaners. If you are buying a new home, it is really important for the builder to save all of the product care manuals that outline safe cleaners to clean shower doors, faucets and the like.

#### **Mildew Remover with Bleach**

A Lysol Product  
800-228-4722

Non-abrasive formula; power of bleach.

#### **Scrubbing Bubbles - Bathroom Cleaner with Bleach**

A S.C. Johnson & Sons, Inc. product  
800-494-4855

This product contains chlorine bleach (sodium hypochlorite) and surfacants.

#### **Comet - Bathroom Cleaner with Disinfectant**

A Prestige Brands, Inc. product  
800-926-9441

It states non-abrasive, bleach-free disinfectant. Active ingredient is Citric Acid.

#### **Dow Disinfectant Bathroom Cleaner**

A DowBrands product  
800-447-4369

It has some strange ingredients and detergents, but no phosphates.

#### **Tilex - Fresh Shower**

A Clorox Company product  
800-227-1860

It contains weird chemicals as well and no phosphates.

#### **Arm & Hammer Clean Shower**

Church & Dwight Co., Inc.  
800-617-4220

no ingredients listed



**Videos**



Click on the above video to see my Stain Solver Oxygen Bleach in action.