

Cleaning methods for stainless steel

Stainless steel is easy to clean. Washing with soap or mild detergent and warm water followed by a clear water rinse is usually quite adequate for domestic and architectural equipment. Where stainless steel has become extremely dirty with signs of surface discolouration (perhaps following periods of neglect, or misuse) alternative methods of cleaning can be used, as outlined below.

Requirement	Suggested Method ^{1,2}	Comments
Routine cleaning of light soiling	Soap, detergent or dilute (1%) ammonia solution in warm clean water. Apply with a clean sponge, soft cloth or soft-fibrebrush then rinse in clean water and dry ⁶	Satisfactory on most surfaces
Fingerprints	Detergent and warm water, alternatively, hydrocarbon solvent	Proprietary spray-applied polishes available to clean and minimise remarking
Oil and grease marks	Hydrocarbon solvents (methylated spirit, isopropyl alcohol or acetone) ²	Alkaline formulations are also available with surfactant additions e.g. 'D7' Polish ¹
Stubborn spots, stains and light discolouration. Water marking. Light rust staining	Mild, non-scratching creams and polishes. Apply with soft cloth or soft sponge and rinse off residues with clean water and dry ^{6,7} .	Avoid cleaning pastes with abrasive additions ³ . Suitable cream cleansers are available with soft calcium carbonate additions, e.g. 'Jif', or with the addition of citric acid, e.g. Shiny Sinks ¹ . Do not use chloride solutions ^{8,9} .
Localised rust stains caused by carbon steel contamination	Proprietary gels, or 10% phosphoric acid solution (followed by ammonia and water rinses), or oxalic acid solution (followed by water rinse). ⁶	Small areas may be treated with a rubbing block comprising fine abrasive in a hard rubber or plastic filler. Carbon steel wool should not be used, nor should pads that have previously been used on carbon steel. A test should be carried out to ensure that the original surface finish is not damaged.
Burnt on food or carbon deposits	Pre-soak in hot water with detergent or ammonia solution. Remove deposits with nylon brush and fine scouring powder if necessary. Repeat if necessary and finish with 'routine cleaning'.	Abrasive scouring powder can leave scratch marks on polished surfaces.
Tannin (tea) stains and oily deposits in coffee urns	Tannin stains - soak in a hot solution of washing soda i.e. sodium carbonate. Coffee deposits - soak in a hot solution of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate).	These solutions can also be applied with a soft cloth or sponge. Rinse with clean water. Satisfactory on most surfaces.
Adherent hard water scales and mortar/cement splashes	10-15 volume % solution of phosphoric acid. Use warm, neutralise with dilute ammonia solution, rinse with clean water and dry ⁶ . Alternatively soak in a 25% vinegar solution and use a nylon brush to remove deposits.	Proprietary formulations available with surfactant additions. Take special care when using hydrochloric acid based mortar removers ^{8,9} .
Heating or heavy discolouration	a) Non-scratching cream or polish e.g. Solvol Auto Chrome Metal Polish ^{1,9} b) Nylon-type pad, e.g. 'Scotchbrite' ^{3,4,5}	a) Creams are suitable for most finishes, but only use 'Solvol' on bright polished surfaces. Some slight scratching can be left. b) Use on brushed and polished finishes along the grain.
Badly neglected surfaces with accumulated grime deposits	A fine, abrasive paste as used for car body refinishing, e.g. 'T-cut' rinsed clean to remove all paste material and dried ¹ .	May brighten dull finishes. To avoid a patchy appearance, the whole surface may need to be treated.
Paint, graffiti	Proprietary alkaline or solvent paint strippers, depending upon paint type. Use soft nylon or bristle brush on patterned surfaces.	Apply as directed by manufacturer.

Notes

1. The products referenced in this information sheet are understood to be suitable for stainless steels. However, no endorsement of the products or their manufacturers is implied and it is acknowledged that other manufacturing companies may provide products of equal or better quality. The following companies manufacture proprietary names mentioned: - 'Jif' - Lever Brothers Ltd, 'Shiny Sinks' - Home Products Ltd, 'Ajax' - Colgate Palmolive Ltd, 'D7 Stainless Steel Polish' - Diversey

Ltd, 'T-Cut' - Automotive Chemicals Ltd and 'Solvol Auto Chrome Metal Polish' - Hammerite Products Ltd

2. Cleaning agents should be approved for use under the relevant national environmental regulations and, in addition, prepared and used in accordance with the manufacturers or suppliers' health & safety instructions. Solvents should not be used in enclosed areas.

3. Nylon abrasive pads should be adequate for dealing with most deposits. If a more severe treatment is needed to mask coarse scratches or physical damage on a surface, use the finest abrasive medium consistent with covering the damage marks. With directional brushed and polished finishes, align and blend the new "scratch pattern" with the original finish, checking that the resulting finish is aesthetically acceptable. Silicon carbide media may be used, especially for the final stages of finishing. Avoid using hard objects such as knife blades and certain abrasive/souring agents as it is possible to introduce surface scuffs and scratches. Scratching is particularly noticeable on sink drainer areas. These are usually superficial and can be removed with proprietary stainless steel cleaners or, alternatively, with a car paint restorer, such as 'T-cut'.

4. If wire brushes are used, these should be made of a similar or better grade of stainless steel. Ensure that all abrasive media used are free from sources of contamination, especially iron and chlorides.

5. When cleaning a surface with any chemical preparation or abrasive medium, a trial should be done on a small, unobtrusive hidden or non-critical area of the surface, to check that the resulting finish matches with the original.

6. To avoid water marks, use clean rinsing water, such as reasonable quality potable (tap) water. Drying marks may be avoided using an air blower or wiping with clean disposable wipes.

7. Rust marks or staining on stainless steels is unlikely to be the result of corrosion to the stainless steel itself (similar marks may also be found on porcelain and plastic sinks). These marks are likely to result from small particles of carbon steel from wire wool or scouring pads becoming attached or embedded in the surface. In the damp environment of a sink, these iron particles rust and cause staining. Rust marks may be removed using non-scratching creams or alternatively using an oxalic acid solution, where iron particles have been embedded in the surface. Special precautions are necessary with oxalic acid, as, although it may not 'burn' unprotected skin, it is poisonous, if ingested.

8. Chloride-containing solutions, including hydrochloric acid-based cleaning agents and hypochlorite bleaches can cause unacceptable surface staining and pitting, and should not be used in contact with stainless steels. Under no circumstances should concentrated bleaches contact decorative stainless steel surfaces. Hydrochloric acid based solutions, such as silver cleaners, or building mortar removal solutions must not be used in contact with stainless steels. Hypochlorite containing bleaches must be used in the dilutions suggested in the manufacturers' instructions and contact times kept to a minimum. Thorough rinsing after use is very important. A frequent cause of staining and micropitting of stainless steels is splashing with undiluted bleach solutions and mortar cleaners. Soaking stainless steel sinks or cookware in dilute bleach solutions for long periods e.g. overnight is not advisable. Similarly, common salt added during cooking or concentrated salt/vinegar mixtures may cause pitting over a period of time. It is good practice to wash stainless steel surfaces after food preparation and cooking.

9. Heavy heat tinting (oxidation) of stainless steel surfaces is unlikely to be encountered in normal use. Normally repeated cleaning with non-scratching creams should remove burn marks from stainless steel cookware, but in exceptional cases, (e.g. after a repair requiring welding or after fire damage) it may be necessary to clean these areas using nitric acid-hydrofluoric acid pickling pastes or a nitric acid passivation solution. Changes in surface appearance usually result when cleaning with these acids. Strong acids should only be used for on-site cleaning when all other methods have been proved unsatisfactory. Nitric and phosphoric acids can be used with care for cleaning and maintenance on stainless steels but sulphuric and hydrochloric acids can be very corrosive and should not be used for cleaning and maintenance of stainless steel items. Citric acid cleaners are less potentially hazardous. Rubber gloves should be used when handling strong acids and care taken to avoid spillage over adjacent areas (see note 2).

10. If all the suggestions and actions in the table have been attempted unsuccessfully, it is worth bearing in mind that stainless steel can be mechanically polished or electropolished by specialists on site. Stainless steel is homogeneous and does not rely on surface plating for its corrosion resistance. If in difficulty contact your supplier or the BSSA.

References:

BADDOO, N R, BURGAN, R and OGDEN, R

Architects' guide to stainless steel

The Steel Construction Institute, Ascot, 1997

Related Links:

[Iron contamination and rust staining on stainless steel](#)

[Care and maintenance of stainless steel](#)

[Post weld cleaning and finishing of stainless steels](#)

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