


PET-SAFE HOUSEHOLD CLEANING



We're bigger, we stand up, we don't have our faces in the tub, the sink, the toilet (hopefully) or the floor, all these surfaces we clean with chemicals, and what barely affects us can have a profound effect on cats, dogs, bunnies, ferrets, birds and other pets. Our pets are right there, walking on the surfaces we've cleaned and absorbing substances into their bare paw pads and, well, bare private areas when they sit down. Their sensitive noses are breathing in the fumes, which are also drifting up into their eyes. Their bodies are smaller than ours, their organs function differently, and we need to keep this in mind when we use chemicals in our house. Cats get an extra dose of chemicals in addition to what they absorb through their paws and skin and respiratory system because they bathe themselves and lick any residues off their fur. Bleach, ammonia and pine-based cleaners have saved many lives as antiseptics and kept cold and flu viruses from spreading but much of the time they are way more than you need for everyday cleaning at home.

VINEGAR AS A CLEANER AND ANTISEPTIC

GLASS AND ALL-SURFACE CLEANER Keep straight white vinegar handy in a spray bottle or water it down 50/50 for cleaning as well, and cider vinegar works just as well but may discolor surfaces—it's the 5% acidity that does the work. Vinegar's acidic nature will help to dissolve residues on faucets, sinks and tubs and fingerprints left behind by sweaty hands. Use it as you would any "glass and all surface cleaner" to remove dirt from your windows or the glass on your pictures, clean your countertops and shine up your chrome faucets, clean marble, finished or painted wood, laminate countertops and composite wood surfaces.

FLOORS, WALLS AND LITTERBOXES But not just for wiping things off, use vinegar to clean floors and walls and anything else you'd use a bottled cleaner for including of litterboxes, though this is one place to follow up with a rinse of bleach (see below).

BAKING SODA INSTEAD OF CLEANSER WITH BLEACH

Baking soda is a gentle but effective abrasive that helps to dissolve substances as well as wear them away without damaging the finish and can be used on all sorts of surfaces including glass, marble, finished wood, laminate countertops and composite wood surfaces; test a small area first. Sprinkle baking soda all over the surface and scour with a damp sponge, or make a paste on the sponge and spread it over the surface, let sit on soap or residue buildup, then scour and rinse, wipe dry and buff with a towel.

CLEANING THE DRAIN

Rather than the caustic substances in most drain openers, the chemical reaction between baking soda and vinegar will quickly dissolve most of what might block your drain with no harmful fumes—vinegar is acid and baking soda is basic, and when mixed together they work very hard to neutralize each other in a fizzy battle. At least once per month, pour a half cup of baking soda into the drain, rinsing it lightly into the drain with a drizzle of water, then slowly pour a pint of vinegar into the drain, letting it fizz up and slow down before pouring the next amount. As the vinegar works its way into the drain it will react with the baking soda, cleaning residue off the insides of the pipe and working its way through the trap. When all the vinegar is in the drain, simply let it sit and work for at least 15 minutes, or until you can't hear any more fizzing from the drain at all. Follow up with a cup or two of boiling water.

OTHER ABRASIVES AND CLEANING METHODS

You can also use regular old table salt as a mild abrasive in place of baking soda for cleaning pots and pans and especially cast iron and include vinegar in this cleaning regimen to clean mineral residues and baked on food from casseroles with either combination. And another tip learned from my days as a cook and waitress—coffee carafes as well as other glass or ceramic containers with hard-to-reach interiors can be cleaned by sprinkling salt into the container and drop in three or four ice cubes, let it sit for a minute or two and swirl around to remove all that residue with the salt as the abrasive and the ice cubes helping scrub, then swish around hot soapy water.

WHEN TO USE BLEACH

In both cleaning and food preparation, there are times when bleach is necessary. After cleaning the litterboxes rinse with a 1:10 bleach and water solution to kill parasites or feces-borne diseases clinging to the inside, pour directly down the drain, let the box air dry then water rinse with a little vinegar to neutralize any bleach that might possibly be left behind. Keep a 1:10 bleach solution handy in a clearly-marked spray bottle in the kitchen if you ever work with raw meat, even organically produced meat or wild game, and clean all surfaces and your hands afterward with an antiseptic unless you wear gloves during preparation. Also keep a spray bottle of hydrogen peroxide under the sink to spray on my cutting boards, knives and utensils, let it sit and fizz until it's finished to make sure it's done its work.

And if you have a pet or a person who has a virus or contagious disease, washing your hands with soap and water and rinsing anything they use with the bleach solution such as eyedroppers, thermometers and litterboxes and even the floor around the litter box, or wiping down faucet handles or other surfaces with the bleach solution where your hands may have transmitted the virus isn't a bad idea. Don't ever use straight bleach in this instance, always use the bleach solution. It's strong enough to kill the germs you need to kill, but not so strong that coming in contact with the residue or the fumes will hurt you or your pets.