

Wash Your Car Like a Pro

"The more often you clean your car, the easier it is and the less time it takes," Mike Pennington, director of training for Meguiar's—a leading producer of car care products

For most drivers who live in areas where winter hits particularly hard, getting safely through snow, sleet and rain takes higher priority than having a sparkling vehicle. But as warm summer weather rolls around, it's a good time to catch up on vehicle maintenance and wash away the grime.

"If I can pinpoint one step that gives the greatest benefit over an automobile's entire life, it's keeping your car's surfaces—the glass, trim, paint and wheels—clean," said Richard Griot of car care and tool supplier Griot's Garage.

Even if you've neglected this advice for many months, it's not too late to change your ways! Of course, the quickest and easiest way to a sparkling clean car inside and out is to take it to a detail shop for a professional job. But at \$75 to \$300 a visit, there's plenty of incentive to learn what you can do on your own to optimize your cars appearance.

Start Out Right

You'll need a steady supply of water, a soft and dirt-free cloth (or a wash mitt, terry towel or soft-bristle brush) and—last but not least—you'll need a proper car wash soap.

Don't make the mistake of using dishwashing soap or a household cleaner on your car—they contain harsh detergents that can strip wax and damage paint.

As Craig Burnett, chemist for Mothers Polishes-Waxes-Cleaners, put it, "Car wash products are designed to remove automotive dirt from cars, not grime from clothes or grease from dishes. Don't confuse your kitchen with your garage."

Luckily, car wash products are carried by a range of retail outlets, from auto parts shops to hardware stores and Web sites. Even some grocery stores carry a limited stock.

And, before you start, if you suspect that you may have unique paint or other accessories that may require special attention, check your vehicle's owner's manual for any manufacturer recommendations.

It's All About Contaminants

The main objective of good car washing is the removal of all dirt and contaminants.

"You should wash your car a minimum of once a week, due to the fact that your car is constantly bombarded with contaminants such as tree sap mist and bird droppings," Pennington told MSN Autos. "If the contaminants are not removed quickly they can bond to the paint and even etch the paint."

If at all possible, park your vehicle in a shaded location before getting started. Washing your car in the sun can cause some surfaces to dry faster than you may want them to, leaving residue and unwanted streaks.

Basic guidelines to bear in mind:

1. First rinse the entire car with water to remove loose dirt.
2. Wash and rinse one section at a time—working from top to bottom—to prevent a section from drying too quickly and leaving deposits or residue.
3. Rub the car surface gently to loosen dirt. Aggressive rubbing can grind dirt right into the finish, leaving scratches and swirls.
4. Be sure to rinse the wash mitt or sponge often to prevent accumulated dirt from scratching the paint.
5. Use plenty of rinse water to carry away the dirt.

After the final rinse, wipe the excess water from the vehicle surface to prevent water spotting. A soft terry cloth towel or a high-quality chamois are recommended. Keep the towel or chamois clean to help prevent scratching, and wipe the vehicle lightly to soak up water without abrading the surface.

If you live in a climate where sand or salt is used on the road surface, be sure to rinse inside the wheel wells, paying special attention to the lower part of the fender where salt and sand may have accumulated. You might want to take a trip to a self-service car wash and use the high-pressure hose for this extra step.

Environmental Considerations

It's important to consider where all the contaminants that you wash off your car—oil, grease and gasoline, as well as the car wash soap and other cleaners—actually end up.

Be aware that any rinse water and contaminants that run into a storm drain system end up in rivers and other open water, without any treatment.

The best location to wash your own car is at a self-serve car wash, so the water will be recycled or sent to the sewage treatment plant before going into the environment.

And if you do plan to wash your vehicle at home, position it on grass or gravel where the water will be absorbed and there will be some filtering effect. You can still have a clean car, but also help to keep the environment clean in the process.

Wheels and Wheel Covers

Have you ever noticed that the front wheels—not the tires, but the wheels—of many cars on the road appear dirtier than the back wheels of the very same cars? This is caused by the accumulation of brake dust shed by disc brakes, which are on the front wheels of virtually all cars these days.

Luckily, there are a number of car care products on the market that do a good job of removing brake dust. Choose wisely and be sure to read the directions carefully.

A spray-on cleaner designed for premium alloy wheels, for instance, will begin to strip a wheel's protective varnish if not rinsed off in the prescribed time frame. And the same spray applied to wheels with plastic wheel covers could have serious corrosive effects.

If you're not sure what kind of wheels or wheel covers you have, refer to your owner's manual for instructions. But once you've identified the right product for your wheels, you'll find it very quick and easy to keep the wheels looking bright and new. With a typical wheel cleaner, you simply spray it on and rinse after 30 to 60 seconds.

Making Your Tires Look Like New

After washing the car and the wheels, you'll want to add a little attention to detail.

One of the easiest and most effective ways to improve the appearance of your vehicle is to apply a protectant to the tires. Many tire dressings simply spray on and require no wiping—giving the tires a clean, slightly glossy look that highlights your clean wheels.

Similar protectants are available for black rubber or vinyl trim pieces on the outside of the vehicle. For the final touch, polish any chrome trim with a product specifically for chrome. Chrome polish is designed to help remove any oxidation that has developed, restoring the chrome's sparkle.

When Should I Wax My Car?

At least 97 percent of today's vehicles come from the factory with clear coat finishes. Clear coats contain stabilizers, ultraviolet light blockers and UV light absorbers that help keep vehicle paints looking new longer by preventing oxidation—the chemical breakdown of the upper layer of paint film caused by sunlight, moisture and contaminants in the air.

But clear coats themselves need attention, too.

"Clear coats can give drivers a false sense of security by appearing to protect the underlying base coat," Matthew Broderick, group vice president of marketing at Turtle Wax Inc, told MSN Autos.

"Clear coats are fragile and susceptible to scratches, abrasions and swirls. When a clear coat surface is scratched and pitted as a result of not waxing, the light can't reflect evenly off the surface, which makes the paint look dull."

Most manufacturers recommend that you wax your vehicle twice a year to protect it from damage and maintain the color and shine. Some auto-care suppliers recommend monthly waxing.

"Ideally, a vehicle should be waxed three to four times per year," according to Pennington, to maximize the protection provided by the wax. "A good strategy is to start right before the winter and get on to a three-month cycle."

Waxing your vehicle will help remove paint oxidation and surface dirt, while adding a protective coating. Wax will improve or remove minor damage such as surface scratches or light contaminants and provide a high-luster finish. Again, consult your vehicle's manual for specific recommendations.

The Waxing Process

Basic guidelines to bear in mind:

1. The paint surface should be cool and not in direct sunlight.
2. Always wash the vehicle immediately before waxing.
3. The temperature should be above 50 degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity should be low.
4. Apply the wax to a small section at a time using either a foam pad or small terry cloth towel.
5. Apply the wax in overlapping strokes or circular motions.
6. Wait for a section to dry to a haze before wiping the wax off with soft, terry cloth towels or cloth diapers.
7. Wipe in both directions, turning the towels often.
8. Shake the towels to remove accumulated wax.
9. When finished, wipe the entire vehicle again, paying particular attention to the edges of trim pieces, door jambs and moldings where excess wax may have accumulated.

For additional shine between wax jobs, several manufacturers offer spray-and-wipe products to quickly enhance the vehicle's shine, such as Turtle Wax Emerald Series Premium Detailer and Meguiar's Quik Detailer.

If your vehicle's paint has been damaged, the paint may need additional work requiring the use of other types of products. You should consult a professional detail shop, auto paint repair shop, or car care product manufacturer for advice before using any products that contain abrasives.

Sprucing Up the Interior

Now that you have finished the part of your vehicle that you show off to everyone as you drive by, how about sprucing up the part of the car you look at from the driver's seat?

First, thoroughly vacuum the car's interior to remove all loose, dry dirt. And be very careful when you reach under the seat—you may have forgotten what you placed under there.

Lint-free towels and clean water will be the main tools for the dash area and seats. Cotton swabs are helpful for getting dust out of tight spots. For the carpet, a clean, stiff-bristled brush is indispensable.

Pennington suggests you always use a product that is designed for the surface you want to clean, whether it is leather, vinyl, plastic, wood, simulated wood or upholstery. Each product is specifically formulated for a particular surface and will not work effectively on other surfaces, and may even damage them.

For carpet areas, use a small amount of a carpet cleaning product and a small amount of water with a stiff-bristle brush. "The biggest problem with interior cleaning is that many people over saturate the carpet when they shampoo," explained Pennington. "A wet-dry shop vacuum is useful for removing excess water. It is very important to let the carpet dry thoroughly before closing the vehicle up tight.

For cleaning windows, avoid products that contain ammonia, because ammonia can damage window tint film on the inside of the windows. Although the tint may have already been in place when you purchased the vehicle, you may not realize that it is a film that needs to be protected. Clean water and lint-free towels are effective for quick window touch-up.

Don't use ammonia or any similar harsh chemical to clean seatbelts, either. They could weaken the webbing, affecting the belts' ability to protect you during a crash.

If you use a protectant or dressing on the dash pad, be sure that it does not leave the surface shiny. A shiny dash can reflect light and be a safety hazard while driving.

Armor All Products Corp., a leading supplier in the auto protectant category, also advises that for safety's sake keep important parts of your car clean and dry—but not slippery. For example, don't put protectant on the steering wheel or the pedals.

If you carry out all of the procedures outlined above, the hours you invest will result in a vehicle that will be considerably easier to keep clean in the future with a routine of weekly or biweekly washing. Combine your washing regimen with a good waxing and interior detailing every three months and the whole process will become quicker and easier each time you do it.