

How to Clean Your Filthy, Disgusting Laptop

Like any tool we use every day, our laptops accumulate dust, grime, oils from our skin and who knows what else. Yours is probably due for a cleaning, and here's how to do it right.

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You know your laptop is filthy. You can see the dirt and grime on your keyboard. You can see that circle of skin oils on the middle of the trackpad. So when's the last time you cleaned it?

Using a freshly cleaned laptop is almost as satisfying as getting a brand new one. The keys are clean, the screen is free of smudges and you fall in love with that three-year-old MacBook all over again. It's also a useful skill if you buy or sell used laptops, since the previous owner doesn't always leave them in pristine condition.

Gather Your Supplies

"You don't need much to clean a computer," said Jolie Kerr, New York Times contributor, cleaning expert and host of the podcast "Ask a Clean Person." "I use exactly four things to keep my laptop clean: Rubbing alcohol, microfiber cloths, cotton swabs and canned air." Ninety percent or higher isopropyl alcohol is ideal, since it won't damage the internal components. And if you have some particularly tough grime or oil, a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser (or other melamine sponge) can also work wonders, though it should be a last resort since it's abrasive.

Don't bother with specialty cleaners you see at big box electronics stores — they'll work fine, but they're probably overpriced compared with what you have at home. "Some people like having them, or they feel better about using an Officially Sanctioned Product," Ms. Kerr said. "That is fine! They also make nice add-on gifts for people who are getting a new computer/tablet/phone for a special occasion." But don't feel like you need them.

Start With the Inside

Once you've gathered your tools, it's time to start cleaning the inside of the computer. Tackling that grime on the keyboard may be tempting, but Ms. Kerr said you should start with the less glamorous internals: "Canned air will blow crumbs and cat hair and what-have-you everywhere, so if you've already cleaned the screen and bezel, you'll just end up having to clean them again after you've used canned air." Start by blowing out the dust, *then* move on to the outside.

Provided you've maintained your laptop well, you shouldn't have to open it up for this step. Just turn off the laptop, unplug the power cable and remove the battery (if it's easily removable). Grab your compressed air, give it a quick burst away from the laptop to get rid of any condensation, then start blowing air into any cracks and crevices: the keyboard, the vents and even the USB ports. Blow in short bursts, since longer sprays can cause moisture to accumulate inside your computer and can damage the fans by making them spin too fast.

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If you're lucky, you probably won't see a big change after doing this. The goal is to prevent dust buildup over time, which can cause your laptop to overheat. If there are visible dust bunnies in the vents, you've let it go far too long without a cleaning. In that case, you may want to open it up (if you're comfortable doing so) or take it to a repair shop for an in-depth cleaning. Smokers and pet owners should take special care to clean the inside often, since you're likely to experience much quicker buildup of dust, smoke, hair and other particulates.

Wipe Down the Outside

Next comes the fun part: making that laptop shine again. "The most critical thing when cleaning a laptop or desktop computer is to apply the cleaning product to the tool you're using to clean, never ever directly onto the computer," Ms. Kerr said. So grab your microfiber cloth, pour a few drops of alcohol onto it, wring it out so it isn't dripping wet, and go to town on the surface. You may want to use cotton swabs and alcohol for the keyboard keys and the small spaces between them. (If there are marks that won't come off, you can try rubbing them with a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser very lightly, but again, they're mildly abrasive and this can alter the finish of the surface.)

It may take a few passes to get all that grime off, but once you do, you should notice a dramatic difference. If your laptop is particularly old, you may not be able to get rid of the shine on the keys; some of us may type like the Incredible Hulk and have worn down the top layer of plastic. There's not much you can do about that.

The screen is a slightly different matter. You should be able to wipe fingerprints off with a dry microfiber cloth, but if you need a bit more cleaning power, a little bit of water — again, poured onto the cloth and wrung out first — can go a long way. Some manufacturers, including Dell and Lenovo, even say you can use a 50:50 mixture of isopropyl alcohol and water, if need be. Just avoid household cleaners with harsh chemicals like ammonia or alkaline on the screen. (That means no Windex, as tempting as it might be!)

Get Rid of Nasty Smells

Let's say you have a particularly terrible case of gross laptop, and even after the above steps, your laptop still carries the stench of ... whatever you've subjected it to. I've seen more than my share of laptops that smelled like smoke (cigarettes and otherwise), and getting rid of that is a challenge. Cleaning the surface can help, but a lot of those smells may also be inside the computer. For that, you can turn to the world's best natural deodorizer: charcoal.

You don't have to go digging through your grill for briquettes, though. Ms. Kerr recommends kitty litter: "Because most kitty litter formulas have active charcoal in them to neutralize litter box smells, it's a great odor eliminator. Seal the laptop up in a bag or closable bin with a cup or so of the litter and leave it for 24 to 48 hours." If you don't have a cat, I've also had good luck with diaper pail deodorizers, which are neat little packets of charcoal you can throw away when you're done. The longer you leave the computer in the bin, the better.

If you're comfortable taking your computer apart, you can also open it up and clean off the board with isopropyl alcohol. But in my experience, this isn't usually necessary — it just speeds up the process a little bit.

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