How to Clean a Coffee Maker with Vinegar

Remove limescale, old coffee oils and bitter taste with one simple vinegar cycle - then rinse properly so your next brew tastes fresh again.



Mineral deposits from water build up inside a coffee maker over time. The machine brews more slowly, the coffee tastes bitter or sour, and the carafe can look cloudy. Plain white vinegar dissolves that build-up. Descale a drip coffee maker about once a month - more often in hard-water areas, less often if you use filtered water.

TIME	MIX	RINSES	HOW OFTEN
About 1 hour, including soaking	1 part white vinegar to 1 part water	2-3 full cycles of fresh water	Every month, or every 40-80 brews

Signs Your Coffee Maker Needs Descaling

- [ ] Coffee brews noticeably slower than before, or gurgles and splutters
- [ ] Coffee tastes bitter, sour or stale even with fresh beans
- [ ] The machine leaves the carafe less full than the water you poured in
- [ ] White, chalky flakes or scale around the carafe and filter basket
- [ ] The warming plate has rust-like marks or burnt-on coffee rings
- [ ] A descale or clean light is on, if your model has one

What You Will Need

- [ ] White distilled vinegar (5% acidity) - do not use balsamic, apple cider or cleaning vinegar
- [ ] Fresh water
- [ ] A paper filter or the empty reusable filter basket
- [ ] Mild dish soap and a soft sponge or cloth
- [ ] A soft bottle brush for the carafe, if needed
- [ ] A dry microfibre cloth

Check your manual first. Most drip coffee makers can be descaled with vinegar, but some brands - especially pod machines and some espresso machines - tell you to use their own descaler instead and may void the warranty if you use vinegar. If your manual says no vinegar, follow the manual.

Step by Step - The Vinegar Descale Cycle

For a standard drip coffee maker. Work with the machine cool and the carafe empty, and keep the room ventilated - the vinegar smell is strong while it heats.

1. **Empty and prepare.** Pour out any old coffee. Remove and discard the used paper filter and grounds. Take out the reusable filter and any charcoal water filter - vinegar will ruin a charcoal filter, so leave it out until rinsing is finished. Rinse the carafe.
2. **Mix the solution.** Fill the carafe with equal parts white vinegar and water. For a 12-cup maker, use about 4 cups of vinegar and 4 cups of water - enough to fill the reservoir to at least half, or to the level your manual states.
3. **Set up to brew.** Pour the mixture into the water reservoir. Put the empty carafe back on the warming plate and place a fresh paper filter, or the empty reusable basket, in place to catch loosened scale.
4. **Brew halfway, then soak.** Switch the machine on and let about half the mixture brew through into the carafe. Then switch the machine OFF and leave it to sit for 30 to 60 minutes. This soak is what loosens hard limescale - do not skip it. For very heavy build-up, use the full 60 minutes.
5. **Finish the cycle.** Switch the machine back on and let the rest of the mixture brew through. Pour the hot vinegar water away down the sink.
6. **Rinse with fresh water - 2 to 3 times.** Fill the reservoir with clean, fresh water only, with a new paper filter in place. Run a full brew cycle and discard the water. Repeat at least once more - twice more if you can still smell vinegar. This step is essential: without it, the next pot of coffee will taste of vinegar.
7. **Re-fit and test.** Put the charcoal filter back (or fit a new one), replace the reusable filter, and brew a test half-pot of plain water or coffee and taste it before serving it to anyone.



Pod, Single-Serve and Espresso Machines

Pod / single-serve: Only use vinegar if the manual allows it. Empty the tank, remove any water filter, fill with the 1-to-1 mix, run brew cycles without a pod until the tank is half empty, let it sit 30 minutes, finish, then run at least 3 fresh-water cycles. Clean the pod holder and needle area separately with a soft cloth.

Espresso machines: Many makers require a specific descaler and a set descale programme. Follow that programme exactly. If vinegar is permitted, never leave it sitting in the boiler for hours, and rinse thoroughly through both the group head and the steam wand.

Wash the Removable Parts

While the machine soaks, wash everything that comes off. Coffee oils go rancid and are the other main cause of bitter taste.

- [ ] Wash the carafe, lid and filter basket in warm water with mild dish soap
- [ ] Scrub carafe stains gently with a soft sponge or bottle brush - for stubborn stains, soak in warm soapy water for 15 minutes
- [ ] Rinse all parts well so no soap is left, and dry the carafe completely
- [ ] Wipe the warming plate with a damp cloth once it is completely cool - never pour water on a hot plate
- [ ] Wipe the outside of the machine and under the brew head with a damp cloth, then dry
- [ ] Leave the reservoir lid open for a while after cleaning so the inside can air-dry

How Often to Clean

Task	How often
Rinse carafe and basket, discard grounds	After every use
Wash carafe, lid and basket with soap	Daily if used daily, or at least weekly
Wipe exterior and warming plate (cool)	Weekly
Vinegar descale cycle	Monthly - every 2-4 weeks in hard-water areas
Replace charcoal water filter	Every 2 months, or as the manual states

If It Still Tastes or Smells of Vinegar

- [ ] Run one or two more full cycles of fresh water - this fixes almost every case
- [ ] Check you removed the old paper filter, which can hold the smell
- [ ] Wipe the carafe and lid again; vinegar odour clings to plastic lids
- [ ] If coffee still tastes bitter after descaling, wash the basket and carafe again - leftover coffee oils, not vinegar, are usually the cause

Safety and Care Checklist

- [ ] Never mix vinegar with bleach or any bleach-based cleaner
- [ ] Let the machine and warming plate cool before wiping or moving it, and take care with the hot vinegar water in the carafe
- [ ] Never immerse the machine, cord or plug in water
- [ ] Do not use vinegar if your manual forbids it - use the maker's descaler instead
- [ ] Do not use strong cleaning vinegar (above 5-6% acidity), flavoured vinegar, or abrasive scourers on the carafe or plate
- [ ] Keep vinegar and hot liquids out of reach of children and pets
- [ ] If the machine still brews very slowly after two descale cycles, stop using it and contact the manufacturer or a technician

Notes

Tip: Write the date of each descale on a small label on the back of the machine. Regular, light descaling is far easier than removing months of hard scale in one go.