How to Get Odor Out of Clothes

Sweat, mildew, smoke and musty smells — out of your clothes, without ruining the fabric.

Ordinary washing does not always remove odor, because odor lives in bacteria, body oils and trapped moisture inside the fibres. The fix is to break those down, rinse them out fully, and dry the garment completely. Start with the gentlest method that fits the fabric, and only move to a stronger one if the smell survives a full wash-and-dry cycle.

Safety — Read Before You Start

- **Check the care label first.** If it says “dry clean only”, take the garment to a professional — do not soak or machine-wash it.
- **Never mix bleach with vinegar, ammonia, or any other cleaner.** Bleach + vinegar creates harmful chlorine gas; bleach + ammonia creates toxic chloramine fumes. Use only one treatment at a time, and rinse thoroughly between methods.
- **Test coloured fabrics first.** Dab your chosen solution on a hidden spot (inside a seam or hem), wait **10 minutes**, and check for colour change, fading or damage before treating the whole garment.
- **Never use hot water on a protein-based smell** (sweat, milk, vomit) before treating it — heat can set the odor into the fabric.
- **Hydrogen peroxide (3%) is for white and light fabrics only** — it can bleach coloured fabric. Always test a hidden spot first.
- **Wear gloves** when handling very smelly items (mildew, vomit, pet accidents) and wash your hands after.
- Do not use vinegar, baking soda soaks, or hydrogen peroxide on **silk, wool, or leather** unless the label allows it.

What You Will Need

- Distilled white vinegar (5%) — **1 cup (240 ml)** per soak or wash load
- Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda) — **½ to 1 cup (100–200 g)**
- Mild liquid laundry detergent — your normal dose, plus **1–2 tablespoons** extra for pre-treatment if needed
- 3% hydrogen peroxide (household grade) — **½ cup (120 ml)**, whites only (optional, for stubborn odors)
- Washing soda (sodium carbonate) — **½ cup (120 g)**, optional, for sturdy cotton and synthetics only
- Clean white towels, a large basin or bucket, and a soft toothbrush
- A washing machine and a dryer, or a sunny, well-ventilated drying spot
- Optional: enzyme-based laundry pre-treat or biological (“bio”) detergent; unscented oxygen bleach (sodium percarbonate), used exactly per packet instructions

Step 1 — Find and Treat the Source

- **Sweat / body odor:** usually in underarms, collars and waistbands — pre-treat these areas (Step 2).
- **Mildew / musty smell:** common when clothes sat damp in the washer, a gym bag or a hamper — needs a full soak (Method 2) and complete drying.

- **Smoke:** cigarette or cooking smoke clings to surface fibres — a vinegar soak (Method 1) followed by fresh air usually lifts it.
- **Pet odor / urine:** blot up as much as possible first, then use the vinegar rinse in Method 1. Never use ammonia-based cleaners on urine — to animals, ammonia smells like urine and can encourage repeat marking.
- **Food, grease or vomit smells:** remove solids first with a blunt knife or spoon, blot (never rub), then pre-treat before washing.
- If the garment is only lightly smelly, skip straight to Method 1. If the smell is strong, old, or has survived a normal wash, use Method 2.

Step 2 — Pre-Treat the Smelliest Areas

- Turn the garment **inside out** — most body odor sits on the inside of the fabric.
- For underarms, collars and cuffs: dampen with cool water and rub in **1 tablespoon** of mild liquid detergent, or spray with an enzyme pre-treat. Work it in gently with your fingers or a soft toothbrush.
- Leave the pre-treat on for **15–30 minutes**. Do not let it dry on the fabric.
- For a stubborn spot, make a paste of **3 tablespoons baking soda + 1 tablespoon cool water**, spread it over the area, and leave for **30 minutes** before rinsing.

Method 1 — Vinegar Soak (Best First Step for Most Smells)

- Fill a basin or bucket with **cool water** — enough to fully submerge the garment.
- Add **1 cup (240 ml) of distilled white vinegar per gallon (about 4 litres)** of cool water — roughly a 1:16 ratio.
- Submerge the garment completely, pressing it down so no part floats dry. Soak for **30 minutes** for a light smell, or **up to 1 hour** for a strong one.
- Lift the garment out and rinse thoroughly with cool water, then wash as normal (see “Washing After Treatment”).
- **Important:** never add vinegar to the wash cycle at the same time as detergent or bleach — vinegar cancels out detergent and reacts dangerously with bleach. Use vinegar in a separate soak, or in the rinse cycle only (**½ cup / 120 ml** in the fabric-softener dispenser), never in the wash with detergent.

Method 2 — Baking Soda Soak (For Strong, Set-In Odors)

- Fill a basin or bathtub with **warm water (not hot — about 30–40°C / 85–105°F)**.
- Dissolve **1 cup (200 g) of baking soda** in the water and stir until it disappears.
- Submerge the garment completely and soak for **30 minutes to 1 hour**. For very stubborn mildew smells, soak for **up to 4 hours** — but never overnight on delicate fabrics.
- Drain, press the garment gently to remove dirty water (never wring or twist delicate items), and rinse with clean warm water until the water runs clear. Then wash as normal.
- **Optional boost for sturdy fabrics only:** for cotton and polyester that still smell after the baking soda soak, add **½ cup (120 g) of washing soda** to a fresh warm-water soak for **30 minutes**, then rinse thoroughly. Washing soda is stronger than baking soda — do not use it on silk, wool, down or delicate fabrics, and always rinse very well.

Method 3 — Enzyme Treatment (Best for Sweat and Body Odor on Colours)

- Apply an enzyme pre-treat or biological (“bio”) laundry detergent directly to the smelliest areas (underarms, collar, waistband).
- Leave for **15–30 minutes**, following the product’s own instructions, then wash as normal at **30–40°C (85–105°F)**.
- Do not use enzyme products on silk or wool unless the product specifically says it is safe for them.

Method 4 — Oxygen Bleach Soak (Whites and Light Colours Only)

- Dissolve oxygen bleach (sodium percarbonate) in warm water **exactly per the packet instructions** — typically 1–2 tablespoons per gallon (4 litres).
- Soak the white item for **1–6 hours** (follow the packet; never exceed its maximum time), then rinse thoroughly and wash as normal.
- Never use chlorine bleach on coloured clothes, and never use chlorine bleach to “fix” a yellow sweat stain — it can react with antiperspirant residue and make yellowing worse. Oxygen bleach is not the same as chlorine bleach; do not substitute one for the other.

Washing After Treatment

- Wash on a **cool or warm cycle (30–40°C / 85–105°F)** with your normal detergent. Do not use hot water (60°C / 140°F or above) until the smell is fully gone — heat can set any remaining odor.
- Use the correct detergent dose — too much leaves residue that traps odor; too little won’t clean. An **extra rinse cycle** is worth more than extra detergent.
- Run **one extra rinse cycle** with no detergent. Optional freshening rinse: **½ cup (120 ml) white vinegar** in the rinse cycle only — never in the wash with detergent or bleach.
- After washing, **smell the garment while it is still damp**. If any odor remains, repeat the treatment before drying — dryer heat sets odors just as it sets stains.

Drying — The Step That Locks In Freshness

- Dry promptly. Never leave washed clothes sitting damp in the washer for hours — that is how mildew smell starts. If you can’t dry immediately, run a quick rinse-and-spin again.
- Tumble dry on the setting the care label allows, or line-dry outdoors. Sunlight is a natural deodorizer: hang smelly items in direct sun for **1–2 hours** where possible, turning once. Limit sun-drying for dark garments to 1 hour to avoid fading.
- Make sure the garment is **completely dry** before folding or putting it away — even slightly damp fabric stored in a drawer or closet will smell musty within days.
- For items that can’t be machine-dried (wool, delicates), lay flat in a well-ventilated room with airflow, flipping after a few hours, until fully dry.

Preventing Odor From Coming Back

- **Wash gym clothes and sweaty items promptly.** Don’t leave them in a closed gym bag or laundry basket for days.
- **Don’t overload the washer.** Clothes need room to move and rinse; an overfull drum leaves detergent and odor behind.
- **Leave the washer door ajar after use** so the drum dries out. Run a monthly maintenance wash: an empty hot cycle (**60°C / 140°F**) with **1 cup (240 ml) white vinegar** or a washing-machine cleaner.
- **Use the right amount of detergent** and skip fabric softener on gym wear and towels — softener coats fibres, reduces absorbency and traps odor.

- Air out clothes between wears, and store clothes dry in breathable storage with good closet ventilation.

What NOT to Do

- Do not mix bleach with vinegar, ammonia, or any other cleaner — the fumes are harmful.
- Do not use chlorine bleach on coloured clothes or to fix a yellow sweat stain.
- Do not mask odor with extra fragrance, fabric softener or scented sprays without cleaning first.
- Do not put a still-smelly garment in the dryer — dryer heat sets odors.
- Do not leave washed clothes sitting damp in the washer.
- Do not soak silk, wool, leather or “dry clean only” items at home — take them to a professional.
- Do not use very hot water on a protein-based smell before treating it.
- Do not scrub delicate fabrics hard — gentle rubbing with a soft toothbrush is enough.

Tick-Off Checklist

Tick each step as you finish it.

- [ ] Care label checked — garment is washable (not “dry clean only”); silk / wool / leather set aside for professional cleaning
- [ ] Odor source identified (sweat, mildew, smoke, pet, food / grease) and solids removed, area blotted — never rubbed
- [ ] Hidden spot tested on coloured fabric — waited 10 minutes, no colour change or damage
- [ ] Smelliest areas pre-treated (1 tbsp detergent or enzyme pre-treat, 15–30 minutes; baking soda paste 3 tbsp + 1 tbsp water for 30 minutes if stubborn)
- [ ] Vinegar soak done if needed (1 cup / 240 ml vinegar per gallon / 4 litres cool water, 30 minutes, up to 1 hour)
- [ ] Baking soda soak done if needed (1 cup / 200 g in warm water 30–40°C, 30 minutes to 1 hour, up to 4 hours for stubborn mildew)
- [ ] Enzyme pre-treat used for coloured sweat odor if needed (15–30 minutes per product instructions)
- [ ] Oxygen bleach soak used for stubborn white / light odors only, if needed (per packet, 1–6 hours; never chlorine bleach on colours)
- [ ] Garment machine-washed at 30–40°C with normal detergent dose
- [ ] Extra rinse cycle run (½ cup / 120 ml vinegar in the rinse only, optional — never with detergent or bleach)
- [ ] Garment smelled while still damp — treatment repeated if any odor remained, before drying
- [ ] Garment dried promptly and completely (sunlight 1–2 hours where suitable, or tumble dry per label)
- [ ] No bleach mixed with vinegar or ammonia at any stage; no dryer use on a still-smelly garment
- [ ] Prevention in place — sweaty clothes washed promptly, washer not overloaded, washer door left ajar, softener skipped on gym wear and towels

Notes

Print this checklist and keep it in your laundry room.