

A Neat Freak's Guide to a Clean Suitcase

From bacteria-infested handles to (gulp) bedbugs, what's living in your luggage might freak you out. Five experts, from a doctor to a dry-cleaning guru, tell us how to clean even the most soiled suitcase.

By Terry Ward, Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2010

We all know that the door handle to the airplane lavatory is a breeding ground for bacteria, but have you ever considered that similar germs might find their way into your suitcase?

Before your inner germaphobe lunges for an airsick bag, a dose of reality is in order. "There's really very little disease you can get from germs on an inanimate object," says Dr. Ronald A. Primas, M.D., of TravelMD.com. "Any time you have a lot of people crammed into a small place, like an airplane, bus, or subway, your risk of acquiring disease is somewhat higher but most of the diseases people get when they travel come from contact with other people directly—not indirectly."

Still, as any germaphobe knows, the fact that dirty luggage isn't likely to make you sick provides little solace. Plus, what about the very real possibility of picking up bedbugs or grease stains? Five experts share insider tips on treating the most common suitcase disasters—including when to tackle the mess yourself, when to call in the professionals, and the easiest ways to protect yourself in the future.

What's living on my suitcase? Should I be cleaning it after trips?

Bacteria and germs are everywhere. Since you never know who's been hoisting your luggage handles behind the scenes (not to mention what's taken up residence on the bottom of that carry-on—E. coli, for example), it's a good idea to have a post-trip plan of attack. "Every time you use your luggage, I would take a damp rag with Lysol and just give the bottom of the bag and the handles a quick once-over," advises Chuck Horst, president of Margaret's Cleaners San Diego, a dry cleaning service specializing in the care of couture clothing, leather cleaning and handbag and shoe repair. In addition, Horst advises keeping luggage out of your bedroom and—above all—off your bed when you're unpacking after a trip.

CLEAN IT

1. Buy some Lysol Disinfecting Wipes.
2. Spot test your suitcase in a discreet area to make sure it won't damage the fabric.
3. Wipe down the bottom of the bag (including wheels) and the handles with Lysol wipes. Squeezing Purell into a rag is similarly effective for removing germs.
4. If you want to completely degerm your suitcase, you can also spend \$45 for a professional ozone treatment: a process in which an ozone generator is used to oxidize bacteria. Leather, vinyl, and plastic bags will have to be dry cleaned by hand (costs will vary depending on the size and scope of the damage).



AVOID IT — Nesting suitcases that can be stored inside of each other might seem handy, but since the outside of a suitcase is the dirtiest place, it's a bad idea to store them this way, says Horst. If you do, be sure to cover a piece of luggage with a plastic garbage bag before placing it inside another suitcase.

A bottle of red wine broke inside my bag! How do I clean this mess?

"When red wine spills in your luggage, it is not a good day," says Horst, explaining that it's one of the toughest stains to get out. And while spilled alcohol of the clear variety doesn't necessarily cause discoloration, breakage in your luggage can mean glass shards in the crevices and residual odors that conjure "eau de frat house" everywhere you roll.

CLEAN IT

1. Empty your suitcase of its contents and use a vacuum with a crevice tool to suck up all

pieces of broken glass from the interior (be sure to check suitcase pockets before vacuuming).

2. Newspapers are hygroscopic (meaning they can readily soak up moisture), says Horst, and can be used to absorb some of the wetness from spilled liquids. Roll up a few pieces of newspaper and place them inside your closed bag for two to three days.
3. Canvas and nylon bags can be scrubbed with reasonable force using a toothbrush and a product such as liquid laundry detergent, according to author Barbara DesChamps, whose book *It's in the Bag: Your Custom Business and Travel Wardrobe* includes a chapter on fabric cleaning and care.
4. To address major odors, Horst suggests purchasing carbon that's used in aquariums from a pet store and placing it inside a sock in your empty luggage. Spraying Febreze Auto in the suitcase interior is another way to freshen odiferous bags.
5. Wine Away, Horst says, is a product that can help with dissolving red wine stains (evergreenlabs.com, \$21 for two 12-oz. bottles).
6. If the exterior of your bag is still stained, you'll need to turn to a professional, like Horst. Leather can be refinished at a cost of \$120 to \$250, depending on the size, extent of detail, and color of the bag. Canvas and nylon bags can be re-dyed for \$60 to \$120.

AVOID IT — Wrap bottles in multiple Ziploc bags before placing them into your luggage to prevent leaks in case of breakage. Commercial airline pilot Omar Amin swears by the VinniBag, a reusable bag with inflatable air chambers that protects bottles from breakage (vinnibag.com, \$28).

How do I prevent bed bugs from hitching a ride in my carry-on?

With even five-star hotels making the news for bedbugs these days, you should be thinking about how to protect your luggage. "The outside of luggage is typically how bedbugs are getting

(continued on back)

a ride back to somebody's home," says Jeffrey White, a research entomologist with BedBug Central, an exhaustive online resource that shares information (everything from bedbug identification literature to research and development news) and sells products (from traps that go under furniture to luggage sprays) designed to keep the critters at bay. When it comes to their favorite luggage hangouts, says White, bedbugs like to lurk on zippers, on seams, and alongside the rubber ribbing on a suitcase's exterior.

CLEAN IT

1. If you suspect bedbugs at your hotel, begin by notifying hotel management and demanding a different room immediately.
2. Even if you switch rooms, you'll want to bag all your clothes for transport back home. It never hurts to have some dissolvable laundry bags handy when you travel—you can place them directly in the wash, which means that anything living on (as well as in) the bags will be killed.
3. Once home, immediately dump everything washable into the laundry for a hot wash-and-dry cycle.
4. If a visual inspection of the outside of your suitcase shows the critters are there, wipe or spray the bag with 91 percent isopropyl alcohol, which will kill them on contact, says White.
5. Before putting the luggage away, use a crevice cleaner to vacuum out the entire suitcase; then wrap it in plastic bags for storage.
6. If all else fails, using a product like Nuvan Prostrips is a brawny step to take in the battle against bedbugs. Simply place your empty suitcase in a garbage bag with one of the strips—the strip releases an odorless gas that kills the unwanted bloodsuckers (\$50 for a 12-pack).

AVOID IT — While chances remain slim that your hotel room will have bedbugs, you can take preventative action by using a spray like Pronto Plus (prontoplus.com, \$6.75 for a 10-ounce can) before you travel, coating the inside and outside of your luggage to keep bedbugs away, says Michael Colongione, president of GotchA! Bed Bug Inspectors.

Yuck, my bag is covered in black grease. What now?

Airport baggage systems are made up of all sorts of moving parts lubed with grease to keep them running smoothly. So it's no surprise that many a frequent flier has seen his or her suitcase emerge looking like it's done a lap around a racetrack rather than the baggage carousel. If you have a hardcase or a nylon bag, there's a chance you'll be able to get the stains out yourself; leather and canvas bags require professional treatment.

CLEAN IT

Hardcase bags

1. On hardcase bags, says Horst, "start with a product like Simple Green and a rag to try to get the grease out," and then move up to products like Formula 409 Glass and Surface Cleaner and Windex Original, which contain ammonia and are more aggressive cleaners (but carry a risk of color and luster damage).
2. Do a color test first on a discreet part of the bag to make sure the product won't damage the suitcase.
3. Then apply Simple Green to a damp, soft rag and wipe it over your suitcase, followed by a swipe with a clean rag to rinse and one with a dry rag to finish. (The ammonia cleaners can be sprayed directly onto the bag and wiped with a sponge or soft rag.)
4. Finally, if your hardcase bag lost its luster in the cleaning process, use Armor All Original Protectant or automotive wax to shine it up again.

Nylon bags

1. For nylon or other soft bags affected by grease, DesChamps recommends using dry cornstarch. "Rub the cornstarch into the fabric, let it sit for as long as it takes to absorb the grease, and then brush it off, repeating as necessary," she says. She recommends getting as "much of the grease off as possible this way before you try to clean the suitcase with detergent."
2. After you've done all you can with cornstarch, it's time to break out the soap. Horst recommends mixing Ivory Snow with water—a good option because it won't bleach out the color or degrade the fabric of your suitcase. Fill a pan halfway with warm water and add just enough powder or liquid to make suds with gentle splashing, he says.
3. Next step: Apply the suds to the bag (again, using a soft rag or sponge). Heavy soiling may require a minute or two of scrubbing and repeated applications.

Leather bags

1. For leather bags, you definitely want to employ the help of a dry cleaner who specializes in accessories, says Horst, since using wet products to try to lift grease will only cause it to become further ingrained in leather and "much harder, if not impossible to get out." The cost starts at \$40 and goes up depending on the bag.

AVOID IT — Using Scotchgard Fabric & Upholstery Protector on your luggage as a preventative measure goes a long way in making it easier to remove grease stains after the fact, says Horst. Keep a distance of about 18 inches from the suitcase when you apply the aerosol spray, he says, and be sure not to apply in heavy coats, as Scotchgard can darken colored fabrics.

Help! My shampoo exploded like a bomb inside my luggage!

Who hasn't arrived at their destination and found a soupy, soapy mess where once there were shampoo and conditioner bottles? Exploding toiletries are a fact of life for most frequent fliers. And while the mess is inherently clean, cleaning it up often leads to a foamy disaster.

CLEAN IT

1. The first thing to know when cleaning up spilled soaps and shampoos is that, in most cases, no additional cleanser is necessary.
2. Horst recommends using a spray bottle with water to slowly lubricate the saturated area. Then alternate between spraying and vacuuming with a wet/dry vac to suck the moisture out.
3. Unless your luggage is a hardcase, avoid getting it really wet as part of your cleaning process, says Horst, as that will only drive the spilled soaps deeper into fabrics. (Hardcases with soiled interior linings can require professional cleaning, which can range from \$95 to \$165.)
4. If the cardboard bottom of your bag has been saturated with shampoos or other exploding liquids, there's a chance that it's permanently damaged and will need to be replaced—an easy, but not inexpensive, fix at most luggage repair centers, where experts will insert a new base into your bag for \$120 or more.
5. Leather bags saturated with shampoos and soaps should be brought in for professional cleaning, which costs between \$120 and \$250 (you'll pay up to \$250 more if the lining needs to be replaced).

AVOID IT — Those TSA rules that mandate Ziploc bags for liquids in carry-ons make a lot more sense when applied to transporting toiletries in your checked bags. Putting individual toiletries or your entire toiletry bag in a Ziploc bag or two when you travel is a simple measure that can save you a lot of hassle.