

The microwave lemon trick – and 10 other household hacks that actually work

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

hack: a good solution or piece of advice

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What chores do you do around the house? Do you enjoy housework?
2. Where do you look for solutions to difficult cleaning or other household issues?
3. What are your favourite household hacks?

2 Key words

a. Find the following words in the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. A _____ is a long, thin wooden or metal pin used for holding together pieces of food during cooking. (paragraph 1)
2. If something is _____, it is made specially for a particular person or situation. (paragraph 2)
3. _____ is a red-brown layer that forms on iron and steel after it comes into contact with air and water. (paragraph 3)
4. _____ is a growth that develops on old food or things that have been left in warm, wet air for too long. (paragraph 3)
5. If something is _____, it is experienced very strongly and is difficult to fight against. (paragraph 5)
6. _____ is a substance that stops something from moving towards you. (paragraph 6)
7. _____ are the small pieces of a solid that sink to the bottom of a liquid, e.g., coffee. (paragraph 6)
8. If something is _____, it is not clear. (paragraph 8)
9. To _____ is to heat or cook something in a microwave. (paragraph 9)
10. _____ is the yellow liquid waste that you release from your body when urinating. (paragraph 10)
11. To _____ is to mix something into a liquid to make it weaker. (paragraph 11)

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. The painting wasn't fully dry yet, so it got _____ when they touched it.
2. I'm not sure how to get the _____ off this iron table outside – it's completely covered by it!
3. Would you like to roast a marshmallow? The marshmallows are in the bag, and there are _____ on the table.
4. She knows how to drive but finds the stress of driving in the city just too _____.
5. He had a _____ attachment made for his bike so he could transport his surfboard on it.
6. Citronella is a natural mosquito _____, but it is not always effective.
7. You can disinfect a sponge by _____ it in the microwave for a minute.
8. Did you see the _____ growing in the shower? It is really gross!
9. Don't throw out your coffee _____; put them in the garden instead.
10. This is a concentrate. You need to _____ it before you use it.
11. The moment I opened the door, the smell of cat _____ hit my nostrils.

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Rebecca Seal

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1 Set up a watering system

Keep pot plants alive while you're on holiday by setting up this clever system from Armen Adamjan. Take an empty plastic bottle, pierce the cap with the tip of a sharp knife and stick a cotton bud through the hole. Fill the bottle with water, replace the lid, tape a skewer or small bamboo cane to the side of the bottle so it extends about 20cm beyond the lid, and turn the whole thing upside down (a hole in the base of the bottle will help the water flow). Poke the skewer into the soil at the base of a potted plant, and the water will slowly drip down the cotton bud until you get back.

2 Sew your own luxury curtains

"Bespoke curtains are very expensive, but you can customise ready-made ones easily," says Kate Watson-Smyth, homes writer and podcaster. "Buy two sets – four curtains – and sew them together using two for each side of the window to give a sense of luxury and fullness. Alternatively, buy flat linen sheets and sew ruffle tape along the top for hooks." (This will also make them pull more easily than fabric tab tops, which tend to stick.) A personal favourite hack: if your curtains don't pull smoothly, spray the rail with furniture polish.

3 Make your own all-purpose cleaner

In an attempt to avoid noxious chemicals, Nancy Birtwhistle, eco home and garden expert, created a homemade toilet cleaner. "But," she says, "it is much more than that. It will remove algae, dissolve rust and kill mould, clean shower screens, baths, sinks and shower heads, brass and copper, and will remove the toughest stains on laundry."

- 4 Mix 200g citric acid with 150ml boiling water until clear. Stir through 20ml of eco-friendly washing-up liquid and 5–10 drops of organic essential oil (optional), cool, then pour into a 400ml spray bottle."

5 Take the work out of laundry

KC Davis (Domestic Blisters on TikTok) creates hacks for people who are neurodivergent or who find it hard to look after their homes or themselves. For example, if you find laundry overwhelming, do it once a week, she says: wash everything on cold and don't bother sorting by colour. When the clothes are dry, she doesn't fold. And the world does not end.

6 Make your own bug repellent

Save used coffee grounds, then spread out on a tray to dry for a few days. Shape a couple of spoonfuls of the dry grounds into a mound on a heat-safe plate or bowl, light the top and leave to smoulder (outside). The smoke smells like roasting coffee and deters wasps, flies, and mosquitoes.

7 Remove stains

According to the many, many cleaning experts of #CleaningTikTok, for machine-washable fabrics stained with mud, blood, ink, tea or coffee, you need a bag of old-fashioned washing soda (sodium carbonate), which will cost you about £2 a kilo. Mix up a strong solution in hot water and soak for an hour or so before washing as normal. For oil stains on fabric or leather, try using baby powder.

8 Clean your computer screen

Adamjan recommends using a damp teabag to clean a smudged or dusty computer screen. Dip the bag in a cup of cold water (or re-dip a used one from your morning cup of tea), rub it all over the screen and then polish with a clean, dry cloth or paper towel. This trick also works well on mirrors.

9 Freshen up the microwave

Food writer Samira Kazan says lemon is the best way to deal with a grimy, greasy, or sticky microwave. Squeeze a lemon into a microwave-safe bowl and add the shell (the outer skin of the lemon). Zap for five minutes, leave to stand, door closed, for 10 minutes, and then open and wipe down.

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10 Tackle bad smells

Bicarbonate of soda is an excellent neutraliser: it can remove the smell of urine (from both pets and toddlers) from a fabric armchair. It also works on stinky shoes, rugs, and carpets, says YouTuber Melissa Maker; she uses a sieve to sift it evenly over her uncovered mattress to keep it smelling fresh.

11 Clean almost anything with vinegar

If your fridge really, really smells, bicarb won't help, but a good clean with vinegar will. Dilute distilled white vinegar 50:50 with water. Add a few drops of essential oil or vanilla extract if you don't like the smell of vinegar (it fades quickly) and spray, then wipe everywhere inside the fridge. Use the same spray on glass and most kitchen surfaces (be careful with wood, marble or stone) and the inside of food-waste bins. Or add a cupful to the washing machine before running it with detergent to soften laundry and brighten whites.

12 Rescue burnt pans

Remove stuck or burnt food from metal pots and trays by placing on the hob over a medium heat and adding boiling water. Bring to a simmer, soften the burnt bits, then scrape them off with a spatula. Cool, then wash as normal. (Adamjan uses a paste made from lemon juice, vinegar, and bicarb to scrub oven racks.)

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions.

1. What three things (and which tool) will you need to make your own plant-watering system?
2. What are the three main ingredients in Nancy's toilet cleaner?
3. What else can the toilet cleaner be used for?
4. How does KC Davis suggest you do laundry?
5. What can be used as a natural bug repellent?
6. What old-fashioned ingredient can remove laundry stains and remove bad smells? How?
7. How can you use a teabag to clean a computer screen?
8. What natural thing can you use to clean a greasy microwave?
9. What can you use for smelly things when bicarb doesn't work?

4 Key language

a. Complete the phrasal verbs from the article with the correct particles.

1. formally establish a system: set _____
2. remove something from somewhere: take (something) _____
3. move from being close together to being in different places across a larger area: spread _____
4. make a group of things messy or mix them together: mix _____
5. make something or someone clean and pleasant: freshen _____
6. clean a surface with a cloth: wipe _____
7. remove an unwanted top layer from something: scrape _____

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b. Complete the statements with the phrasal verbs from activity a.

1. Could you please _____ the rubbish?
2. Here's a cloth to _____ the table before we eat.
3. I think the best strategy to find the missing cat is for us to _____ and look in different places.
4. Give me a minute to _____ before we go.
5. I just bought a new computer, and Paul is helping me to _____ it _____.
6. Simply _____ pineapple and lemon juice with some mint and sugar for a refreshing treat.
7. You can use steel wool to _____ old rust.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “I like my house to be perfectly clean.”
- “I find cleaning quite relaxing.”
- “I feel overwhelmed by chores.”
- “I love hacks to help me keep housework under control.”

6 In your own words

a. You are going to create your own life hack. Choose one of the categories below. Think of something you know how to do well or would like to learn to do better. Write at least two hacks.

- health / fitness
- beauty / personal care
- cooking / nutrition
- cleaning / household chores
- technology / devices
- work / productivity

b. Present your hacks to the rest of the class.