

Crestview Dental Care

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How to Clean Retainers [No Harsh Chemicals Required]

Retainers often collect gunk like bacteria, plaque, and tartar. That's why you must clean your retainer every day and store it properly when it's not in your mouth.

Rinsing your retainer with water isn't going to cut it. However, you can soak your retainer in baking soda, vinegar, and castile soap to safely disinfect it.

An orthodontic retainer holds your teeth in place after orthodontic treatment like braces or Invisalign.

Because teeth are prone to orthodontic shift (going back to their original position), you should wear your retainer every day. This helps retrain your muscles to keep your mouth in the proper position.

For the first 9-12 months, you should wear your retainer 22 or more hours each day. After that, you need to wear your retainer every night — preferably, for life.

The two types of retainers:

- Clear plastic retainers: Clear retainers are removable retainers prescribed after a course of clear aligners. Clear plastic retainers are less durable than other retainer types and must be handled with care. Even a well-cared-for clear plastic retainer is only supposed to last for two years at a time.
- Fixed retainer: Wired, fixed, or bonded retainers are permanent retainers that can last forever if needed. They're attached to the teeth and have the highest potential for plaque buildup without proper retainer care.

To clean clear plastic retainers:

- When you aren't wearing your retainer, keep it in a stainless steel container with water, baking soda, and Castile soap (optional).
- Once a week, soak the retainer in warm water, white vinegar, and baking soda for 15 minutes.
- If you notice buildup on your retainer despite cleaning it properly, use an ultrasonic cleaner to clear the buildup. An ultrasonic retainer cleaner can deeply clean and sanitize both Hawley and Invisalign retainers.
- If you don't have an ultrasonic cleaner or the retainer still needs to be cleaned, take it to your dentist or orthodontist. They have special tools and solutions to clean the retainer thoroughly.

If your retainer has visible plaque on it, gently brush it with a toothbrush, but don't use toothpaste. This should not be done on a regular basis.

To clean fixed retainers:

1. Keep up with good dental health including brushing, flossing, and tongue scraping regularly.
2. Use a floss threader to clean the retainer wires. You'll thread the floss between each of the teeth and clean thoroughly to below the gum line.

Retainer Cleaning Tips

1. Never let your retainer dry out.

If you let your retainer dry out, tartar and biofilm will bind to it easily. If your retainer is not in your mouth, it should be submerged in a liquid.

Retainers are made for a wet environment, and moving them from your mouth (a wet environment) to the bathroom counter (a dry environment) is a terrible idea that can age your retainer prematurely.

2. Avoid denture cleansers.

Denture cleaners like Efferdent or Polident should not be used to clean your retainer. These cleansers contain persulfate, an allergen that can irritate the sensitive skin of the mouth.

In 2008, the FDA issued a warning about the use of cleaning solutions containing persulfate. They recommended that users rinse their retainers and dentures thoroughly before inserting them into the mouth.

But persulfate can leach into porous retainers, making them nearly impossible to rinse completely. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the FDA also suggested that consumers consider persulfate-free alternatives.

3. Avoid mouthwash.

Mouthwash to clean or soak your retainer may contain alcohol and/or sodium lauryl sulfate, both of which will dry out your retainer. Don't use mouthwash to clean your retainer.

4. Don't use heat on your retainer.

High heat may destroy your retainer by warping it. When cleaning your retainer, do not use:

- Hot water (or boiling water)
- Dishwashers
- Washing machines
- Your car's dashboard
- Microwaves

5. Don't soak your retainer in a chemical cleaning solution for more than 15-20 minutes.

If you choose to use a denture cleaner, retainer cleaning tablets, or mouthwash, don't soak your retainer more than 15-20 minutes. The caustic chemicals can wear away the material and may cause it to break down faster.

6. Don't brush your retainer.

Unfortunately, using a toothbrush on your retainer (with or without cleaning products) actually gouges into the surface of the retainer and may cause it to age.

Don't use even a soft toothbrush on your retainer on a regular basis.

On rare occasions, it may be necessary to brush your retainer if you see that it has collected visible plaque. However, if it doesn't come off in one short brushing session, talk to your orthodontist.

7. Keep your case clean.

Your retainer case can also become a source of contamination if not properly cleaned. You should clean your retainer case every time you put your retainer in your mouth.

To clean your retainer case:

1. Run hot water over the case for 3-5 seconds.
2. Scrub with dish soap for 20 seconds, using a sponge or scrubber appropriate for the material of your retainer case.
3. Pat the case dry (don't let it dry on the counter). You can clean a stainless steel retainer case in the dishwasher for extra bacteria-killing power.

How to Clean Your Retainer with Baking Soda

Baking soda is a safe, effective ingredient for cleaning your retainer. It has "specific antibacterial properties to oral microorganisms," which means it's particularly good at killing harmful bacteria found in the mouth.

Baking soda may help to prevent the bad smell associated with a dirty retainer. It's even beneficial for fighting bad breath and maintaining a more alkaline pH.

If you have a fixed retainer, using a toothpaste with baking soda can help to prevent gunk from building up on the wires.

To clean your retainer with baking soda:

1. In a clean, dry, stainless steel container, dissolve 2 tablespoons of baking soda in 3/4 cups of warm water.
2. Keep your retainer in this solution when you're not wearing it.
3. When you're ready to put in your retainer, rinse it with warm or cold water.

How to Clean Your Retainer with Castile Soap

Castile soap can be a great alternative to cleaning tablets or other cleansers too harsh for your retainer. Using castile soap to clean your retainer helps add a "clean" smell and freshness.

Get a castile soap without essential oils, which may be highly antibacterial but also could disrupt your oral microbiome if not fully rinsed off your retainer.

To clean your retainer with castile soap:

1. In a clean, dry stainless steel container, combine 3/4 cups of warm water with 2 tablespoons of baking soda.
2. Add 1-2 squirts of unscented castile soap.
3. Gently mix until the baking soda is dissolved.
4. When it's time to put your retainer in, rinse in thoroughly using warm water.

How to Clean Your Retainer with Vinegar and Baking Soda

White vinegar is a safe, potent cleanser for your retainer. Vinegar can rid your retainer of bacteria and fungus.

To clean your retainer with vinegar:

1. Mix equal parts warm water and white vinegar in a clean stainless steel container.

2. Dissolve 2 tablespoons of baking soda in the mixture.
3. Put your retainer in the mixture for 15 minutes.
4. Remove the retainer from the stainless steel container and rinse it very thoroughly with warm or cold water. Dentures and retainers are generally cleaned in a similar way. Cleaning your denture with vinegar can help prevent denture stomatitis, which is associated with Candida fungus in the mouth.

Avoid These Methods to Clean Retainers

Don't use these retainer cleaning methods that can damage your retainer or harm your oral health:

- **Hydrogen peroxide:** Peroxide causes free radical reactions, which is why it's a powerful antibacterial agent. However, I do not recommend using it in your mouth because it can harm the oral microbiome.
- **Toothbrushing:** Even a soft toothbrush may scratch your retainer. Scratches leave room for bacteria to hide.
- **Toothpaste:** Many toothpastes are designed to be abrasive, which can cause the same problem as using a toothbrush. Using toothpaste to clean your retainer may scratch it and leave abrasions where bacteria live.
- **Dishwashers, boiling water, or other heat:** Heat can deform your container. Stick to warm or lukewarm water, never hot or boiling water.
- **Mouthwash:** The alcohol and SLS in most mouthwash can dry out the material, causing it to age faster.
- **Persulfate cleansers:** Cleaning tablets or solutions that contain persulfate, usually marketed for dentures, can cause irritation to your sensitive mouth tissue.
- **UV light sanitizers:** UV light can damage acrylic, degrading it on a molecular level.
- **Bleach, alcohol, and other harsh chemicals:** Caustic or drying chemicals will destroy your retainer.