

How to have a low chemical car

by Misha Van Loder

As anyone with chemical sensitivities knows, a car can be a very polluted and uncomfortable space to be in. The petrochemical fumes that cars emit into the environment often make their way into the cabin space as well. Add to that the plastics and rubber (dashboard, consoles, door trimmings and the window seals), combined with the upholstery, usually velour, vinyl or leather seat coverings and polyurethane foam seat cushioning that all out gas vapours into the car's tiny air space, and we then have a very toxic place that can cause a lot of people problems and ill health. Just as bad for some are the cleaning products often used in cars. On top of that there are the dreaded fragrance emitting devices or deodorisers most people insist on using. All these chemicals combined make for a very unbearable driving experience.

I have tackled this problem and won! I hope these solutions work for others as they have done for me by providing clean air in an often polluted and confined space. We all need clean air- often all this takes is a little bit of hard work and some tried and tested solutions.

You will need:

Good weather, as in the summer or spring months of the year.

- A second hand car (for tips on how to find a low chemical car see 'How to find/buy a low chemical car') at the end of this article.
- A relatively clean area to start with, by this I mean not cleaned with chemicals recently, not smelling too strongly of fragrance or anything scented and especially not stinking of cigarettes (if you are affected by them). My car's previous driver wore perfume but was kind enough to not clean her car before the sale.
- Leather seats can be preferable for people sensitive to synthetics or if you are not provided with this choice seat covers can be made or bought. (Cotton or Sheepskin).
- Lots of Bi-carbonate of Soda, a soap or detergent you absolutely

know you are ok with (I used Herbon Fragrance Free Dishwashing Liquid) and a couple of bottles of Hydrogen Peroxide (Faulding's brand).

- A packet of Chux Super Wipes (these are used to protect any surface that is to be sealed) that have been washed and dried until suitable for use. If this is not possible because of the supermarket chemicals you could use strips of cotton cloth or calico available from Spotlight or haberdashery stores (rags may suit). A roll of Aluminium Foil Tape (this is a remarkable product for people with chemical sensitivities that can be used to seal many things!)
- An unpolluted wet and dry vacuum cleaner. The best that I have found is the Vax (mine is the Vax 2000) which will tolerate hot water and still do a great job without the use of harsh chemicals. (We also used a hand held steam cleaner but we are not sure if this really helped.)

Most important is someone who can help you who is not sensitive to chemicals. (Thank you Dan for all the time you have spent on my car that is now a pleasure to drive). Note: I still have a car air filter and nearly always have the air-conditioner on.

If you have found a car that is relatively clean inside you are lucky, hold onto it. If not, keep looking as they are out there (see the end of this article). Any car that has strong fragrance inside (especially if it's making you really sick) is not worth the time and effort this will take, as the chemicals used in fragrances are designed to hang around a long time. Some deodorisers and cleaners can be dealt with but others can't. If after the first clean you have an improvement then it will only get better with time. You just need to speed it up!

To get started you will need to vacuum the car and then remove the seats. Someone who is good with a spanner will be handy at this point. Sprinkle bi-carbonate of soda over

the removed seats and the carpet of the car and leave sit for a minimum of 24 hours. Vacuum up the bi-carbonate thoroughly and clean the seats with the Vax, soap or detergent and hot water (2-3 times). Then put them out in the sun. At this stage the more dirt you see going into the Vax's wash water the better because the dirt will have absorbed odours. When they are dry completely cover them with bi-carb and leave them for two weeks or for as long as you can in a warm dry place. If you can place them in the sun this will really help. (Don't leave them out at night as they may get damp and develop mould which can then be an added problem that, like perfume, is not always easy to fix!)

If possible keep your car parked in the sun or a warm dry place with the windows and doors open. We kept mine under a carport in my partner's driveway where the roof is clear and it gets quite warm on a sunny day. If you cannot find a suitable place to leave the car to air at night or when it's raining, it is best to keep it closed at these times. If by chance your car does get damp or wet you will need to dry it as soon as possible. To do this put the car under cover and place an oil-filled column heater inside on medium to high. Make sure that it is not touching any surfaces and close all the doors and windows. This will be a good thing to do as every time the car heats up it will be releasing the odours. The most important thing is to not leave the car damp for an extended period of time.

Stretch the seat belts all the way out and put strong clothes pegs at the end before the retractor so it so they don't retract back in. Fold them into buckets of hot soapy water putting as much of the seatbelt as you can into the water and peg them to the edge of the bucket and leave overnight. Change the water and then using lots of soap and a nail or scrubbing brush scrub the seat belts and soak again in fresh clean soapy water. Repeat this process. Next soak them in a solution

of Bi-carb and hot water (two cups per bucket) and leave overnight again.

Keep the seat belts pegged and stretched as far as you can all the way out. Once they are dry spray them with the hydrogen peroxide until they are saturated, for this part it's best to have them in the sun. Continue with this until you have an improvement. The Hydrogen Peroxide will attach itself to the perfume molecules and as the hydrogen peroxide evaporates it will release the odours as well. Seat belts can also be replaced if necessary.

We found the steering wheel and stick shift to be too difficult to clean. They both had perfume on them because the previous driver wore perfume. Not only was it a problem for me to touch the steering wheel but it was also a problem for me when the sun hit the steering wheel and released fumes that affected me. Try cleaning with hot soapy water repeatedly and place in the sun. Cleaning with a steam cleaner may also help. We tried all of these and it was still a problem so we sealed it with the Chux strips and foil tape. Or if money permits you could replace the steering wheel.

With the Bi-carb working its magic on the seats and carpet it is time to seal any other problem areas including the steering wheel, stick or gear shift and most importantly the outside vents that leak fumes into the car. For this job use the blessed foil tape. If you plan on selling your car one day you will need to protect the surfaces. Wrap your choice of cloth (we used clean chux) very neatly around the steering wheel and seal in place with a piece of tape. Next wrap the foil tape around the wheel until the whole thing is covered.

Because the aluminium can rub off onto the hands it is best to cover the wheel with something else. It took me a while to find a suitable steering wheel cover that I was ok with so I wore cotton gloves for a while. Finally I chose to put 4 meters of Black elastic around the wheel. It is 4 cms wide and quite thick. I found it at Spotlight. Now I find it not only does the job but it looks good too

(compared to before). Do the same with the stick/gear shift handle, door handles and anywhere else that is a problem for you. Some autoshops and internet shops sell leather gear stick covers.

The vents only need to be sealed if they actually let car fumes in. First try driving the car with the recirculation switched on, this will often close them off to outside air. I drove a BMW that no matter what I did still leaked its own fumes in. Now I drive a Subaru Outback 1998 that closes the vents automatically when I switch the recirculation on. If I have the air-conditioning on I also fare much better as there are less fumes from the furnishings in the car (heavy traffic will also make a difference to the amount of fumes that come in, if I am in traffic I need the air cleaner on and if in peak hour I wear a mask). Ask other people who are sensitive to chemicals what they do when they drive.

Some older cars leak fumes in quite badly so sealing the vents up can make a big difference. To seal your vents lift the bonnet and you will see them along the bottom of the windscreen. If you have trouble finding them contact your mechanic. Clean around the vents with hot soapy water and allow to dry. Cut the foil to size and stick over the vent opening. This will seal the vents from fumes entering the car. This solution is not long term and may need to be replaced as the engine and wear and tear loosen the tape.

I also have an air purifier in my car. It is a Foust and I highly recommend it. We got ours in from America. There is also the brand Aironic that someone else I know who is sensitive finds helpful.



Finding a suitable car

Options

- Buy a car privately as you will have a better chance of finding one where the owner doesn't use these products, or of asking them not to clean the car before sale. (Chances are some people hardly use many cleaning products but when they realise it's time to sell they will then go and clean their car with chemicals and fragrances).
- When you phone about a car ask straight away 'does the car have any strong scented or deodoriser products in it'? If they say no then ask 'has the car been cleaned with any strong smelling products'? This way you will save yourself time looking at many unsuitable cars.
- Car yard bought. You will need to speak to them and ask them to not clean or deodorise the car. Most of the cars in car yards have had a lot of cleaning products used in them. (I know someone who phoned around the car yards and told them which type of car she wanted and the year and model and then asked if when one came in they could wait until she'd seen it before cleaning it.
- Some people find leather or suede seats better than fabric upholstery. Leather seals the foam padding quite well.
- Purchase a car from a relative or friend who doesn't use fragrance or smoke.
- Ask other chemically sensitive people what type of car they drive and what works for them, as some models are better than others. I rang a few members on AESSRA's Phone Contact list and spoke to someone who was fairly sensitive who drove a Subaru and that's how I decided – but remember what is suitable for one person will not be suitable for every chemically sensitive person.