

Ask Jon Eakes

Our washing machine smells.

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Karen from Kingston, Ontario writes: "We have a washing machine on the second floor and have noticed the water from previous cycles does not always seem to drain completely away, as evidenced by a smell of grey water when the machine begins it's next cycle. Our upstairs plumbing is well vented with a 3 inch vent to the ceiling. Is there any way to get rid of this smell?"

COULD CANADIAN COLD WATER BE THE PROBLEM?

The answer I had for Karen in 2001 is written below, but in 2003 I may have discovered a far more definitive answer related to Cold Water Washing.

HUNTING FOR ODOUR SOURCES

We need to look somewhere else for the problem, because water never drains completely away from a washing machine. If you look at the photo you see the drain hose looped loosely into the standing pipe, which itself has a P trap at the bottom. This hose goes up as high as the top of the washing machine. This whole arrangement is made to precisely prevent a siphon action from draining the water out of the washing machine. A little water is always left to keep the pump gaskets from drying out. Since the water left is the last rinse water from the cycle it should be quite clean and not leave a grey water smell.

I can see three possible problems. If the laundry room is not well vented with an exhaust fan, you could have mould or mildew building up in corners or the back of closet space or under the washing machine because of the high humidity generally found in laundry rooms.

If you have pot lights in the ceiling, the dryer fan could be drawing a musty odour down from the attic through the pot lights. Yes this does actually happen. All pot lights in an insulated ceiling must be of the air tight type.

It is possible that there is an odour producing bacteria that has settled into the washing machine, and is kept alive by the presence of water. This would be a bit unusual as the use of bleach in the laundry should kill anything like that.

CLEANING OUT THE SMELL

One good way to cut through all that old soap and other residue without taking the washing machine apart (a very difficult task to lift out the moving basket) is to use Oil Lift. This is a eco-friendly product originally designed to remove oil from concrete in an ecologically responsible way – but as a cleaner it has many other uses and is available at all Canadian Tire stores.

For a smelly washing machine – you want to fill the machine for a hot water wash, full load. If you want to add in some towels at the same time, fine, or leave it just water. Once the machine is full, pour in a little Oil Lift, agitate a bit and check the suds level. You are looking for just a suggestion of suds on the surface -- some suds but not a lot -- the same minimum suds level you want with any detergent. That will probably be about ¼ cup of the Oil Lift but could be more. Agitate it just enough to mix in the Oil Lift and check the suds level. Then turn the machine off for about an hour to allow it to soak into the scum on the inner tank. Then run through the full cycle. If you still have some odour, repeat this once or twice.

To keep the machine clean and “fresh”, always use just enough soap to see a suggestion of suds, no more. Use warm water wash/cold water rinse, but not cold/cold. Every once in a while when cleaning your tough to clean work clothes; use Oil Lift in the place of your detergent, leaning your clothes and the tub at the same time. Some people have told me they have switched to Oil Lift for all their laundry.

[Click here for the full story on Oil Lift.](#)

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