

# Protecting Our Parishes, Missions, and Schools

## Exhaust Fans — *The Hidden Hazard*

When you think about cleaning the bathrooms, you probably don't immediately think about cleaning the exhaust fan. The fan is usually high on the wall or in the ceiling and difficult to get to, but it's still a major source of dirt, residue and bacteria in restrooms. Restrooms and other exhaust fans are designed to pull out the warm, moist air from bathrooms, restrooms or storage rooms. However, these fans are subject to getting dirty fairly quickly because they are pulling moist air and dust towards them, which often settles and sticks to any surface on or around the fan. The movement of fans also tends to create a build up of static electricity, which can cause additional dust to stick fast to the exterior and interior of your exhaust fan. Dampness in any room will eventually lead to mold, bacterial build up, paint and trim damage and could even lead to the structure of the room rotting in some cases.

All of this dust buildup is also collecting on the fan motor and choking off the air the motor needs to keep it cool. Left unchecked by routine cleaning could lead to a burnt motor, wires and in some cases a **FIRE!**

The next time you are in a bathroom, look for the ceiling fan and you will probably see the outside grill covered in dust and dirt and who knows what

else. I did this in my own bathroom at home. It was not too bad on the outside, but there was some dust collecting. So I get my trusty step ladder and flashlight. I found the electrical circuit breaker that controls the fan and turned it off. I then made sure the light and fan switch were off and opened the cover to take a look inside. It wasn't a pretty site. In fact, it was downright disgusting. More than four years, there was a solid inch of dust buildup under the bathroom exhaust fan coverings that no vacuum could get to. A good cleaning of my bathroom fan was needed. Unfortunately, cleaning a bathroom exhaust fan requires a few more steps than just **cleaning a ceiling fan**.

So, here's how to clean exhaust fans:

- 1. Turn off the power as described above:** You will probably not be doing any direct electrical work like what's involved in **replacing a wall fixture**, but you'll still want to be careful around exhaust fans simply because there could be moisture trapped inside or around them and you may want to use a damp cloth to clean them. Turning off the switch is a good start, but you're



really better off turning the breaker off to the exhaust fan circuit if you're going to do this correctly. Remember, safety first and wear eye protection when working overhead!

- 2. Getting ready to clean the fan:** You'll probably need to climb on something just to get to the fan housing. Use a quality step stool or ladder and be extra careful in the bathroom. Surfaces are slick and hard, and you don't want your head hitting any of them on the way down. This can be a little bit of a dirty job, so think about putting down some old towels or some drop cloths if you're worried about dust and dirt falling out of your exhaust fan.





### 3. Remove your exhaust fan cover:

Different exhaust fans come apart in different ways, but the outer covering or decorative bowl is either held on with some sort of screw mechanism or sturdy clips. When all else fails, read your bathroom exhaust fan manual. I know, you don't have the manual. You can find a lot of manuals online or even go to your local home improvement store and simply ask about your particular fan design. You'll also want to carefully remove and set aside any light bulbs you might have in your bathroom exhaust fan.

**4. Quickly inspect your fan:** Take a moment to just look around your fan housing with a flashlight. If you see worn wires, rusty parts or corroded pieces anywhere, then it might be time to replace your bathroom exhaust fan. Yes, you can keep cleaning it, but if it's in bad enough condition you could have a real safety hazard in your bathroom. The last thing you want is to be in a shower at night and have your exhaust fan blow a circuit or cause a fire in your bathroom ceiling.

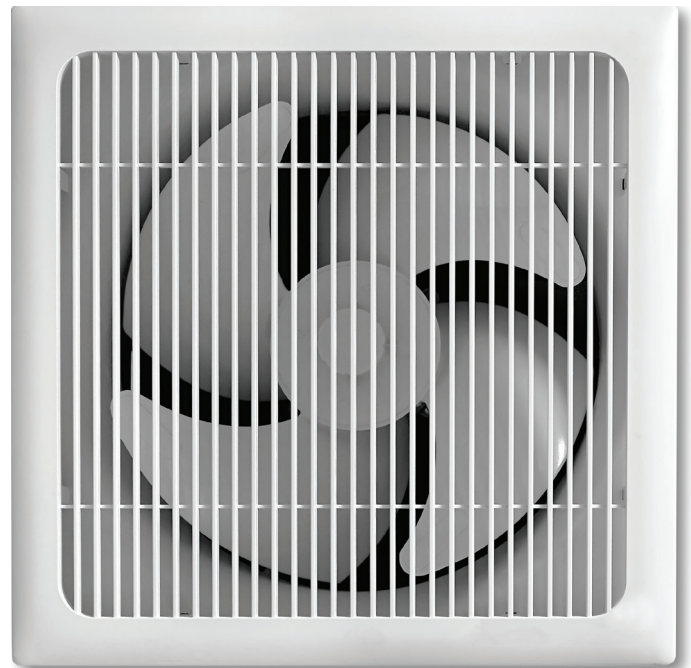
**5. Dry clean your fan first:** My first step is usually taking my vacuum cleaner hose to all the little parts and nooks and crannies in both the fan housing and anywhere around the ceiling that has caked on dirt. Things vacuum off much better when they are dry, so I always do this before I start wiping things down.

**6. Wet clean next:** Now that you've removed the cobwebs and piles of

dust from your fan, you can move on to the more intricate detailed cleaning. You may want to take a damp rag or cleaning wipe (baby wipes will work, too!) and begin wiping down most everything you see. If you have any mold or mildew, then consider using one of those household cleaning sprays or even a little window cleaner with ammonia (but those can sometimes damage surfaces, so use sparingly). Be careful around any electrical housing (you don't want them to get too soaked, just wipe over them once) and try to wipe down your actual exhaust fan blades if you can get to them.

**7. Thoroughly clean the fan cover and grill:** Your exhaust fan cover was removed, but it may also have dust and grime on it. You can wipe that down or even put it through running water if it's plastic. There's no sense in cleaning the fan in your bathroom ceiling and then putting a dirty cover back over it. If you need to scrub dirt, dust or grime off the grill covering you can try using an old dampened toothbrush or wrapping a towel around a butter knife and using that to scrub back and forth.

**8. Let everything dry:** Hopefully you didn't get anything other than the



grill cover completely soaked, but you might want to give everything a half hour to an hour to fully dry. You can pat down the exhaust fan cover with a dry towel or cloth.

**9. Reassemble the exhaust fan:** Now you will want to put any light bulbs back in place (you may want to put in a new one while you're at it and use the old one in a lamp or someplace that's easier to replace it when it blows). You'll want to put the exhaust fan cover back on and tighten all screws or clamps that keep it in place.

Now that all your exhaust fans are clean, you can rest a little easier knowing that there is less chance of a fire caused by a dirty exhaust fan motor!