

Cleaning the Fresh Water System

Should your fresh water tank develop an odor from algae or bacteria, you will need to clean it—otherwise it will simply get worse. Sorry, there is no quick-fix nor magic cleaner that I know of.

Where Does the Water Go?

There is a common misconception among newer RVers that they can flush their fresh water tank by simply hooking up to any water supply and turning on the faucets inside the RV. Sorry, this won't work because when you hook up to the external water supply—e.g., the campground water faucet—the incoming water bypasses the fresh water tank. It does not force the fresh water through the tank and out through the faucets. The only way to actually use water from your fresh water tank is to have the external water shut off at the external source (campground water faucet) and use the water pump in the RV. So, you cannot simply “flush it out” by running fresh water through the system.

Disinfecting your Fresh Water Tank

To clean your fresh water tank, use some chlorine bleach, and do this...

1. Drain and flush out the fresh water tank a couple of times.
2. Remove any water purification equipment and water-filter cartridges.
3. Use 1/4-cup of liquid household bleach (sodium hypochlorite) for every 15 gallons of fresh-water tank capacity. It's easy to mix this in a gallon jug.
4. Pour the solution directly into the fresh water tank. Most RVs have a gravity fill. You can pour it in there. If there is no gravity fill, get a short length of water hose, attach the end to your RV water fill connection, and use a funnel in the other end. Pour the bleach solution into the funnel.
5. Fill the tank with fresh water.

6. Drive around the block—preferably on bumpy roads. You want to cause the bleach solution to slosh all over the inside of the fresh water tank.
7. Turn on the water pump and all internal faucets to pump the solution through the system to every hot and cold faucet at every sink, into the toilet, water heater, and don't forget external faucets and showerheads. You should smell the distinct odor of bleach (chlorine) at every fixture.
8. Close all the faucets and turn off the water pump.
9. Let the bleach solution remain in the system for 2–4 hours.
10. Drain and flush the system. Top off the tank with fresh water and go for another drive (to splash around and wash out the residual bleach). Fill and drain and drive and splash until there is no more bleach odor.

[Author Note... Keep in mind that many/most campgrounds will not allow you to fill and dump full tanks of water at a campsite. Finding a location that will allow you to complete this flushing process may be challenging.]

Not An Alternative Solution

There is much rumor and myth in the RV world that you can disinfect a fresh water tank using hydrogen peroxide. This is true, you can, but there is a catch to it that will stop you. First, the bottle of 3% hydrogen peroxide that you likely have in your RV or house won't do the job—it is not a strong enough solution. Even if you could fill the fresh water tank with the 3% hydrogen peroxide, it wouldn't do the disinfecting job you need.

The higher concentrate required to complete the disinfectant is only sold to authorized recipients—chemical companies, school systems, industry, etc.—and is only available at chemical-supply houses. That concentrate may be as high as 50%—significantly stronger than the off-the-shelf bottle available at your local store. Plus, when using the highly-concentrated solution, there is a specific process required to

neutralize the level of hydrogen peroxide *after disinfecting* to make the tank safe for normal usage. I won't go into that process here.

A Different Solution

The most simple and easiest method to avoid having to clean or disinfect the fresh water tank is to use that water regularly. Even if you are hooked up to the campground water supply, get in the habit of using the water from your fresh water tank (shut off the campground faucet and turn on your water pump), and then refill the tank as needed. You do not have to put your hose away to accomplish this.

It is the exact same process as camping in freezing weather... you fill up the fresh water tank, disconnect the water hose, put it away (to keep it from freezing), and live out of your fresh water tank. When your tank gets low, get out the hose, and fill the tank again. You can do this indefinitely.

Since we boondock regularly—we average 12 nights per month and have for the last few years—we have to use the water from the fresh water tank. Therefore, our fresh (on board) water is regularly used up and refilled. Boondocking is sort of an automatic method of forcing you to use that fresh water. The good news is that we have never disinfected the fresh water tank—and never needed to do this.

Use any process that forces you to regularly use the contents of the fresh water tank. Fulltimers and those who do lots of boondocking go for years without experiencing fresh water tank odors or problems and, also, without disinfecting the tank.