

# LAUNDRY DETERGENTS

## Clean & green options

The chemicals in laundry detergents that clean clothing are called surfactants. But in the case of at least one type, surfactant is also a dirty word.

Nonylphenol ethoxylates, also known as NPEs, are recognized by the Environmental Protection Agency as toxic to aquatic plants and animals. They're also banned in parts of the European Union. But some detergents made for the U.S. still contain those chemicals because they cost less. And in our tests, many laundry detergents with NPEs performed worse than those with more environmentally friendly surfactants. Some other findings:

**Price versus performance.** The highest-rated detergent, SA8 with Bioquest (made by the company formerly known as Amway), cleaned up when it came to, well, cleaning our test swatches, which were impregnated with nine common staining agents, including blood and makeup. It was also the most expensive, at 61¢ per load. Plus, it's available only online. Fortunately, store-bought alternatives, such as Tide Free HE and Gain HE, perform nearly as well for less than half that price.

**Cleaning ability isn't enough.** To boost sales and differentiate themselves from the competition, manufacturers are offering a larger bouquet of fragrances, fragrance-free options, and even detergents mixed with fabric softener. For more information on the latter, see Claim Check on page 7. Our tests revealed that none of those ingredients tended to affect cleaning ability.

**Dropping the ball.** OxiClean sells a slow-dissolving detergent ball, encased in a mesh sack. You put it in your washing machine tub, and it's purportedly good for up to 25 loads. Though slightly more convenient than adding detergent at the beginning of every wash cycle, the product performed poorly from the first load to the 16th. It was the worst detergent we tested. Another new product,

Dropps, a premeasured packet of gel detergent that dissolves in the wash, also settled near the bottom of our Ratings.

### HOW TO CHOOSE

Our tests have shown that there's little performance difference between powders and liquids; it's simply a matter of personal preference. To get the best results from any detergent: First, start the water; then, add the detergent, giving it time to dissolve or mix in the flow; finally, add the clothing. Newer machines have detergent dispensers that will add detergent automatically. Some more tips:

### Use the right one for your machine.

Front-loader manufacturers recommend high-efficiency detergents, typically labeled "HE," which are made to work with smaller volumes of water. It's not as clear-cut for top-loaders, so check the owner's manual. Using the wrong type can lead to oversudsing or poor results.

**For gleaming whites, opt for optical brighteners.** But use detergents with brighteners judiciously because they can make dark clothing look faded. Use a detergent without brighteners for dark loads. Ones in our Ratings without brighteners are key numbers 10, 21, 22, 23, and 27.



2 Gain

5 Kirkland Signature

7 Method

12 Tide

14 Great Value

## Ratings laundry detergents

• Availability Most products in stores through June 2007.



In performance order. Blue key numbers indicate Quick Picks. Products with equal scores are listed alphabetically.

Key number	Product	Type	Cost	Overall score	Test results			
					Cleaning	Keeps dirt off	Keeps dye off	Contains NPEs
<b>HIGH-EFFICIENCY (HE) DETERGENTS</b>								
1	SA8 With Bioquest (Quixtar.com) <sup>1</sup>	P	61¢	99	●	●	●	N
2	Gain HE	L	28	86	●	●	●	N
3	Tide Free HE	L	27	85	●	●	●	N
4	Cheer Color Guard For High Efficiency HE	L	23	82	●	●	○	N
5	Kirkland Signature Ultra 38722 (Costco)	L	12	80	●	●	●	N
6	Sears Advanced Formula Plus With Oxi-Clean Ultra HE 9820	P	12	78	●	●	●	Y
7	Method Fresh Air 3X Concentrate HE	L	22	74	●	●	●	N
8	All Small & Mighty Fresh Rain HE	L	12	64	○	●	●	N
9	Purex HE	L	21	61	○	●	●	N
10	Dropps	G	52	49	○	○	●	Y

Ratings continued on next page

# laundry detergents

<sup>1</sup> Availability Most products in stores through June 2007.

Excellent Very Good Fair Poor

In performance order. Blue key numbers indicate Quick Picks. Products with equal scores are listed alphabetically.

St	Product	Type	Price	Excellent	Very	Good	Fair	Poor	
<b>CONVENTIONAL DETERGENTS</b>									
11	Tide With Bleach Alternative						Ⓢ		
12	Tide With Febreze Freshness						Ⓢ		
13	Tide Cold Water							Ⓢ	
3 14	Great Value Ultra Glacier Breeze (Wal-Mart)			Ⓢ	Ⓢ	Ⓢ			
<b>IS Wisk Dazzling Whites &amp; Colors</b>									
10	Arm & Hammer Clean Burst With Color-Safe Bleach			Ⓢ	Ⓢ				
17	Tide With Bleach			Ⓢ	Ⓢ				
18	Gain With Bleach Alternative			Ⓢ	Ⓢ		Ⓢ		
19	ShopRite Ultra Free 'N Clear			Ⓢ				Ⓢ	
20	Era Max With Bleach Alternative			Ⓢ					
21	Cheer Dark Formula			Ⓢ				Ⓢ	
22	Sears Ultra Plus Stain Fighting Formula 9835			Ⓢ				Ⓢ	
23	Seventh Generation Free & Clear			Ⓢ	Ⓢ	Ⓢ			
24	AH Small S Mighty Free Clear							Ⓢ	
25	All Small & Mighty Stainlifter								
26	Arm & Hammer Free Of Perfume & Dye						Ⓢ	Ⓢ	
27	Cheer Color Guard			Ⓢ	Ⓢ	Ⓢ			
28	Purex Free & Clear			Ⓢ				Ⓢ	
29	Purex Plus Renuzit			Ⓢ	Ⓢ				
30	Xtra With Bleach					Ⓢ	Ⓢ		
31	Kroger Tempo Mountain Scent					Ⓢ	Ⓢ		
32	OxiClean Toss-N-Go Ball	52		•			Ⓢ		
<b>DETERGENTS WITH FABRIC SOFTENERS</b>									
33	Tide With A Touch Of Downy	L	29				Ⓢ		
34	Gain Plus A Touch Of Softness	L	23	Ⓢ	Ⓢ				
a-	Sears Advanced Ultra Plus With Fabric Softener 9812 i	P	8	Ⓢ				Ⓢ	
36	Purex Plus Fabric Softener	L	21					Ⓢ	
37	Arm & Hammer Plus A Touch Of Softener	L	14		Ⓢ	Ⓢ		NA	
38	Tide With A Touch Of Downy	P	31	Ⓢ			•		
39	Gain Plus A Touch Of Softness	P	16					•	

<sup>1</sup> A variable only online. Price doesn't include shipping, which can add \$5.75-\$20 will be reformulated for January 2007, according to the manufacturer, a For high-efficiency washing machines.

## Guide to the Ratings

Cost per load is based on the product's retail price and label recommendations for a heavily-soiled medium-sized load. For type, P means powder, L means liquid, G means gel pack, and means ball. Cleaning is based on how well the detergent removes stains like chocolate ice cream, grass, and red lipstick. Keeps dirt off measures how well a detergent prevents dirt in the wash water from resoiling clothing. Keeps dye off measures how well a detergent prevents dye that bleeds from one article of clothing from staining another. Under contains NPEs (nonylphenol ethoxylates), N/A means the manufacturer wouldn't share this information.

# closeup

## ODDBALLS

Two new twists on laundry detergent, Dropps gel packs and the OxiClean ball, promise convenience as well as cleaning power.

But both cleaned much worse, in our tests, than liquids or powders. 1;

As usual, our Quick Picks are products that offer the best combination of performance and value. These selections also take into account whether the detergents contain nonylphenol ethoxylates, a group of surfactants that are toxic to certain plants and animals and can damage aquatic ecosystems. None of the picks below contain those chemicals. Instead they utilize more environmentally friendly cleaners. Also note that none of these recommendations is a two-in-one detergent and fabric softener that we reviewed in our Claim Check on page 7; that's because they were outperformed by regular detergents paired with separate softeners when it came to softening clothing, according to our sensory panel.

## QUICK PICKS

Best for high-efficiency washing machines:

- 2 Gain 28C per load
- 5 Kirkland 12C, CR Best Buy
- 7 Method 22C

The Gain liquid performs nearly as well across the board as the top-rated SA8 powder but costs less than half as much; the Kirkland has slightly less cleaning power but costs less than a quarter as much. Stick with the pricey SA8 if you prefer powder. Choose the Method liquid if you want minimal fragrance.

Best for conventional washers:

- 12 Tide 27C per load
- 14 Great Value 12C, CR Best Buy

The Tide liquid cleans as well as the top-rated conventional detergent but costs less. The Great Value is just that: very good at cleaning at a low price. Tide (13) is a relatively effective choice if you prefer a powder detergent.