



# Cleaning Products / Seasonal Housekeeping



By Veronica Alvarado



Congratulations! You've made it to Japan!

Now, you may be thinking that keeping your new Japanese home nice and clean should be easy peasy, right? Well, maybe...Due to Japanese homes not having insulation and having such harsh climate, one has to be prepared to battle what is about to come and haunt your home depending on

what season it is. Don't worry, based on my personal experience from living in Japan for two years, I will provide you some dandy information on housekeeping problems you may encounter while in Kumamoto, what you may need from your local supermarket as far as for house cleaning products, learn about tatami care, how to use a Japanese bathroom/kitchen, and some helpful tips on how to survive and battle with every season here in Japan.



## Tatami Mat Care

Most Japanese homes have tatami mats. Tatami mats are made out of woven straw that keep you cool in the summer and warm in the winter. However, it can give off an unusual scent the whole year round. They do require more care and attention than most other flooring materials. That I must warn you!

Q. So, how do we clean and maintain a nice tatami you ask?

A. Well, it is suggested that you vacuum, use a floor roll cleaner, and wipe the mats with a slightly damp cloth following the grain *weekly* (at least during summer). Well, I say weekly just to be safe and to prevent any further problems. It is important to remember to never walk on it with shoes or even house slippers, as the mats are easily damaged. Make sure to keep them dry and well-ventilated; moisture can lead to permanent damage, which may require replacement. If you spill anything on it, wipe it immediately! A few drops of gentle dish soap mixed with water can be used to clean stains and spills. Do not use harsh chemicals to clean the mats because it can cause permanent damage. Tatami cleaning wipes can be purchased to clean surface dirt, but do not mistake these with hardwood floor wipes. I often vacuum first, then use the floor roll cleaner, and wipe the mats last. Using the floor roll cleaner is really convenient and practical to use maybe more than once a week. Also, be aware that tatami mats occasionally need direct sunlight for durability. It's important also to keep your house well ventilated to avoid any moisture. Occasionally leave all your windows open! And it is recommended to not have any heavy furniture on your tatami as mold can grow on that spot. It's good to move your furniture every once in a while so it won't leave a mark and so the tatami can breathe.

However, if you are REALLY serious about cleaning your tatami, lifting the mats individually and airing them out in sunlight on both sides is recommended once a year to prevent mold and tatami ticks. If you decide not to air them outside, most people decide to use a dehumidifier. Not maintaining your tatami may lead to an encounter with “dani,” or “tatami ticks,” which are invisible to the naked eye and thrive in moist places. If you have bites (especially on your wrists or ankles) that aren’t from mosquitoes, then you most likely have dani. Special dani spray is sold in drug stores; they have a needle-shaped nozzle attached to reach below the tatami. Special dani spray is sold in drug stores; they have a needle-shaped nozzle attached to reach below the tatami. After spraying your mats, you should leave your house for several hours. It can be expensive to replace tatami. So it is best to maintain and care for your tatami before they get seriously damaged. Some people put carpet on top of tatami mats, but I strongly recommend against this as it can also lead to mold and dani.



Tatami wet wipes



Floor roll cleaner

## Bathrooms

Phew! Now that we are done discussing tatami care, on to bathroom talk! Let’s try to not make it nasty ok?! Try to clean your bathroom weekly dirt or mold doesn’t build up. For starters, after showering, I suggest you open the bathroom windows and keep your shower room well ventilated and dry to prevent mold and mildew. If there are already some major mold problems in your bathroom, don’t worry because there are solutions. Just be careful when using chemicals to clean your apartment since most are quite toxic. Always make sure the room and apartment is well ventilated when you use them. Wearing gloves and a mask may be advisable depending on how critical the damage is. I suggest you clean your shower weekly as well. Give it a nice scrub even though your shower looks clean because it might not be.



Anti-Mold spray



Shower hair catcher stopper

Unfortunately, Japanese drains are very weak compared to the ones in your home country. Drains may or may not have a U-trap depending on how old your apartment is, meaning things can get stuck easier and smell a whole lot more. Make sure you clean your drains often. Special tablets are available at drug stores or 100 yen stores. Also, I suggest you buy a shower hair catcher stopper. It’s a silicone net that you put on top of your shower drain to prevent any hair clogging. It is such a simple yet brilliant object!

As for the toilet, it is pretty much the same as how you would clean back at your home country. Scrub your toilet with bleach and done. You can also use bleach tablets to go into further cleaning. There are also toilet wipe sheets sold in drug stores or in the 100 yen shops to clean around your toilet. One difference in Japanese bathrooms is that they use special “toilet slippers” when going to the toilet room. These slippers are only supposed to be worn when in the bathroom. Don’t mistake them for your ordinary house slippers. Another difference we all must have heard of is the famous Japanese toilet seat (benza). It’s an awesome toilet seat that has many kinds of self-washing features, including a bidet, deodorizing, seat heating, and many other rad functions! But Japanese toilets aren’t all fancy. There is also the “Japanese toilet.” This is the toilet that is on the floor which means you need to squat down to do business. Most of us westerners avoid these kinds of toilets as if it were the plague! But in the inaka, they are hardly impossible to run away from (at least when it comes to public restrooms).

## Kitchens

The kitchen, the most important space to keep clean! I highly advise you to buy humidity containers since they are lifesavers! Humidity containers are also known as a “shikke tori.” These useful containers control mold in your cabinets where most of the mold will grow. You can also use the mold spray, “kabi cleaner.” After spraying, be sure to rinse the area with water and dry it since the spray is toxic.



In Japan, there are no garbage disposals; instead, you will have to buy a container for the corner of your sink to collect organic garbage (*namagomi*, 生ゴミ). You can buy these trash bags at your local supermarket or drug store. Depending how strict your city is, some require you to buy special garbage bags for every type of garbage. For instance, for your *namagomi*, a regular plastic bag won’t be good. You might be asked to buy a special specific plastic bag that is eco-friendly just for your *namagomi*. I also suggest you to have a basket trap under the drain to collect smaller particles so they don’t clog the plumbing. (The plumbing in Japan is really weak.) These places can get nasty if not properly cleaned. If it gets dirty, there are stores that sell special tablets you can hang or place over the drain to prevent any future damage. Furthermore, if the drain isn’t properly kept clean, it can make the rest of your apartment smell too. In addition to the aforementioned tablets, you can use drain cleaner. It comes in liquid (*haisuikan senjō eki*, 配水管洗浄液) and powder (*haisuikan senjō zai*, 配水管洗浄剤). Right before bed, put some of the chemical into your drain. Rinse in the morning. This needs to be done more often during summer. Put the cleaner down each of your drains, including your bathroom sinks and shower. Be sure to throw away the food in the corner containers, as they can attract bugs. To prevent the smell of your *namagomi* basket and your trashcan, there is a special spray they sell in stores to eliminate or reduce odor. One tip I would add is to place your *namagomi* in a special small trash bin in your freezer. This will prevent bugs from coming to your home; not to mention the *namagomi*’s odor spreading throughout your apartment.

Also, make sure to clean your refrigerator and microwave at least once a month. Refrigerators and microwaves are areas we often forget about, yet they can harbor some of the most detrimental germs. Clean refrigerators with a baking soda and warm water mix. You can also add some dish soap to the mix.



Products to clean your drain



Namagomi nets for sink



Kabi Killer, a.k.a. mold killer

## Laundry

As you may have already noticed, the washing machines in Japan aren't as convenient as in the west. First off, most if not all washer machines here don't have the hot water option. You can find a coin laundry to do the job but coin laundries in Japan are much more expensive than in the US or in Europe. Let's start off with some useful basic translations you will most likely need to use your washing machine:

|                  |               |                          |
|------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 予約 – Timer set   | おこのみ – Cycle  | コース – Course             |
| 水位 – Water level | 洗い – Wash     | 標準 – Standard            |
| 高 – High         | すすぎ – Rinse   | 注水すすぎ – Continuous rinse |
| 中 – Middle       | 脱水 – Spin Dry | スピード – Speedy            |
| 低 – Low          | スタート – Start  | ドライ – Dry                |



After finishing your laundry, it'll be time to dry your clothes. Japan isn't big on using dryer machines. Most Japanese apartments do not contain one. If you have one, consider yourself very lucky! You might find a dryer machine at your local coin laundry but that can get pricey and time consuming. So, do as the Japanese do and let's hang our clothes out in the sun! Getting a laundry pole (monohoshizao 物干竿) for outside is the best option to dry your laundry. Nothing beats hanging laundry outside the old-fashioned way. There are a variety of hanging racks sold in stores. They are often used outside but of course, when it's raining, there are racks to put inside. You can get large standing racks or racks that hang from a hook. Don't forget to buy hang-line clips or large clips to hold your futons to your railing so your laundry won't fly everywhere. Another item you will want are the laundry net bags. It's a net bag to put your delicate clothes in so when you take your laundry out, it doesn't end up all tangled together. You can put your non-delicate clothes in these bags, too, to prevent your clothes from getting tangled. Also, I suggest you to buy lint catchers for your washing machine since most don't have it. Just place it inside the machine and you won't have to deal with removing much lint yourself. And lastly, be extra careful to know the difference between fabric softener and detergent. I know so many ALT's who have mixed up these two and found out too late.

Hang your laundry with these



## \*Laundry Vocabulary:

A softener= juunanzai (柔軟剤), detergent = gouseisenzaikai-sentakuzai (合成洗剤家洗濯剤) or santakuyou-gouseisenzai (洗濯用合成洗剤).

## Seasonal Challenges



OK! Now on to the good stuff! Let's discuss the types of challenges you will face depending on which season it is in Japan. No matter how well-kept or clean your apartment is, you will deal with some major challenges for each season. Japanese homes are less well insulated than in your home country; they may not be insulated at all. For that reason, your home will be more vulnerable to what the climate has in store for you.

### **Summer (natsu) [なつ・夏] and Rainy Season (tsuyu) [つゆ・梅雨]**

IT'S SO HOT!!! Get your sweat towels and fans ready at all times. Due to the high level of humidity, mold will be the main issue during this time of year. Pay extra attention to your futon, clothes, shower, and cabinets since they are in high risk of growing mold. Ventilation is extremely important! It will prevent mold from growing in your home and possibly damaging your belongings. If possible, try to keep some of your windows open during your travels. Ventilate, ventilate, ventilate is the key word to prevent any mold infestation upon arrival. As for the bathroom/shower, I strongly suggest you to keep your window open. Even during winter you will most likely develop mold and mildew. I usually leave my bathroom windows open after I have showered and at night. Don't let the mold win this battle!

Summertime is the most complicated season to maintain a nice and fresh apartment due to summer's high humidity. There are many ways to dehumidify your place:

\*Moisture collecting packets (*shicketori*) [しっけとり・湿気とり]

You can find these in many forms, such as in tubs, hangers, sachets and containers. These help keep mold from taking over your closets, cupboards, drawers, and the objects in them. These packets are the least expensive way to prevent any mold on your items. Once you have mold on your fabric, it is almost impossible to get rid of it completely. So prevent it from happening in advance.



除湿剤 (ドライ&ドライ)

Shicketori

## \*Dehumidifier

This option is the most expensive but the easiest/convenient way to prevent mold from happening. It has the added benefit of being a source of water for laundry or plants.

Another important challenge you will face with during summer are futons [ふとん・布団]. It is important to put them away after you are done using them to prevent mold from growing on the tatami mat or on the futon itself. I recommend hanging your futons outside in the sun to air them out and beat them with a futon whacker (*tataki*) [たたき] weekly. At first, it feels as if you are whacking a piñata rather than your futon. Seriously guys, just whack the heck of that futon and you will see all the dust flying away~. Moreover, futons absorb the body's moisture, which can build up and lead to mold growth. If you have several futons that are not being used regularly, it is recommended you put them in large vacuum-seal bags to keep the moisture out. I recommend you put *shikke tori* between the futons and blankets.



Tataki

As I have already mentioned, during summer you will most likely develop mold everywhere. When it comes to the kitchen or in the bathroom, use the “Kabi Killer” spray. This is a fantastic way to kill mold. Just spray directly on the mold then wipe down with a sponge or rag. Be careful when using this item since it is toxic. Wear gloves and a mask if you want to be extra careful. Once you used the kabi killer, don't forget to rinse and dry everything thoroughly afterwards.

## \*Preventing the Heat

So let's move on to how to keep cool in the summertime because it gets ridiculously hot here in the 'moto. I will provide you some tips on how to not melt during summer.

**Fan:** Obviously, the fan is the least expensive way to keep cool. Most fans have timers to shut off automatically which is very convenient when you use it at night. Some basic kanji you will find on your fan are:

切: Power Off                      弱: Low setting

中: Medium setting                強: High setting

**Curtains:** A simple way to keep cool is using curtains. Not only is this a great way to keep cool but you can also remain warm during winter. Curtains provide a little bit of insulation that Japanese houses lack. The heavier and nicer curtains you use the better insulation you get in your home.

**Air conditioning:** Our most beloved air conditioner (Eakon, エアコン) is the best way to keep you and your house cool. The downside is that it can get expensive. Remember to keep your windows and doors closed when using the air conditioner since you want to try to keep your place insulated well. Clean your air filter before using to circulate clean air without mold. The Japanese air conditioner is a pretty useful appliance

throughout the year. Most air conditioners in Japan also have a heating option that will be very convenient in winter. It might also have a dehumidifier option as well.

**Cooling face pads and Cooling Wipes:** You can find these at any drug store or general store. Place a cool gel pad on your forehead or body and the pad stays cool for about 8 hours. Most people use them when you have a fever but it's a good way to cool down. Another great item I recommend is the Gatsby's cool wipes for face and body. Not only do these wipes cool and refresh you for a long time, it also serves as a deodorizer. This removes sweat, dirt and stickiness on the go. There is also a "cool ice" wipes.



Cooling Face Pads



Gatsby Cooling Wipes

### Autumn (aki) [あき・秋]

Ah autumn, the season when it finally starts to cool down... Bugs and mold won't be as much of a bother as in summer so this is a time where you can relax a bit more. However, it is typhoon season... When a typhoon is coming, make sure you have an emergency kit prepared, with flashlights, batteries, candles, matches, bottled water, cash, and something to keep your mind occupied that doesn't require electricity. Moreover, always be ready to have lots of food in your house that doesn't require electricity or gas since they might be unable to be used. Having lots of canned foods and water are your best survival supplies. Some houses have typhoon shutters on their houses that you may want to get secured in the event of a typhoon. Also be sure to familiarize yourself with your own circuit breaker in the event of a power outage. At least in the countryside, you will occasionally hear emergency sirens warning you about an upcoming typhoon. So be ready just in case a serious typhoon is coming your way.

### Winter (fuyu) [ふゆ・冬]

Although we live in the southern part of Japan, winter in Kumamoto can be very cold. Some people here may have a colder winter than others if they are living closer to the mountains. Some also might experience heavy snow while others like myself get absolutely no snow in their city. Unfortunately, as I have mentioned before, most Japanese houses do not have central heating or insulation. Due to this reality, many Japanese people only heat one room to save money on energy costs during the winter. I will provide some useful tips on how to stay warm in winter.

**\*Bubble wrap:** This is a cheap, easy, and somewhat effective when all you have is single-paned windows. You can apply with water or tape, but if using water, be careful since the moisture could lead to mildew. They are sold in long rolls at home centers.

**\*Electric:** No kerosene fumes, easily portable, but it can lead you a very expensive bill at the end of the month if you use it too much.

\***Kerosene heaters** (*sekiyū-sutōbu*) [石油ストーブ] : You will most likely find these in older apartments. These are great to heat your apartment instantly. Kerosene heaters are cheaper, but after a few hours be sure to open your windows so that you don't die from carbon monoxide poisoning. Be sure to leave the windows open for as many hours as your heater was going. If you leave the kerosene heater for too long, the distinctive smell will make you dizzy and you could faint, so try to not leave it on for a long time. Of course, don't place anything flammable on or near the heater. Hardly anyone in the States uses a kerosene heater due to its potential hazard but just be extra careful and pay close attention whenever using this heater. You will most likely find a kerosene heater everywhere at school during winter since they are the least expensive option to keep warm.

\***Kerosene** (*tōyu*) [とうゆ・灯油] This can be purchased at most gas service stations. You can buy it by the container or have it delivered to your home.

\***Electric blankets:** For safety reasons, don't leave them on while you sleep since you might burn yourself. They have a remote attached to it that allows you to control the range of heat you want.

\***Kotatsu:** [こたつ] : You will fall in love with this table during winter. A kotatsu is a heated table which you place a blanket underneath. It's like a slice of heaven. You won't want to go out if you are using this.

\***Air conditioner:** Your air conditioner should have a heating option. Unfortunately, this is an expensive option. One-room use recommended.

\***Electric carpet:** These heat the floor, but not recommended as a main heat source since you can only feel the warmth when you are on top of the carpet.

\***Heat tech:** These make wonders! They are thin, high-thread count tights worn under the clothes. They are basically long johns or thermals that help you stay warm.

\***Heating pads** (カイロ): There are also heating pads available in Japan. You just open these up and they get warm. You can stick them on the insides of your clothes when you go out to keep warm away from your kotatsu and electric blanket. Don't put these directly on your skin as they get extremely hot and you could get burned. The heat from these can last around 8 hours or so. These are very convenient when working in the classroom since most schools don't have a heater.



Heating pads



:::Good Luck Cleaning:::

