

How to Clay your Car

Introduction

As our cars spend most of their time outside they are subjected to a continued attack from an unseen enemy, airborne pollution and fallout. Washing alone will not remove these pollutants, the answer is detailing clay, either poly clay or one of the new forms in either a towel or mitt. Detailing clay was invented in Japan in the 1980's, the clay towel/mitt is a microfiber cloth on one side and the other being a special rubber surface that grabs and removes the contaminants. It is the professional detailers tool of choice in order to remove these bonded surface contaminants and prepare the paint surface to be polished.

The Test

How do you know if your car needs clayed? Many people have never heard of detailers clay much less know how to use it, so what method do we use to test the paint for bonded surface contaminants? Simply take a plastic sandwich bag, put it over your hand and run your hand over the surface of the paint, if it feels smooth you don't need to clay but if it feels gritty, sand paper like or lumpy you need to clay it. Many people believe that their new car won't need to be clayed, this is usually incorrect. After a car rolls off the production line it is subject to attack by these airborne pollutants. It is parked up at the factory waiting transport to the docks then at the other end waiting for transport to a dealer, then on the dealers forecourt. So from manufacture until purchase it could have been outside for a considerable length of time.

What are Bonded Surface Contaminants?

- Paint Overspray
- Tar Spots
- Tree Sap
- Rail Dust
- Industrial Pollution
- Road Grime
- Brake Dust
- Insect Remains
- Pollen

Bonded surface contaminants will stick to the surface of the paint making it feel rough, they spoil the gloss and they will allow dirt to rest on the paint so when you wash you run the risk of instilling swirls in the paint (see fig 1).



Fig 1

How does Clay Work?

Detailing clay works in conjunction with a clay lubricant that you spray onto the surface of the paint, the clay glides on this thin film of lubricant. The bonded contaminants sit on top of the paint, so when the clay is moved over the paint it abrades everything away that is sitting proud of the paint surface. This is totally safe for the paint, however it may introduce some slight marring to the surface but this is not a problem and can be easily polished out.

Types of Clay

There are many different brands of clay but they fall into three main types of aggressiveness.

- Aggressive (body shop use)
- Medium Grade
- Ultra Fine

As detailing professionals and enthusiasts the last two types are the ones we will use most.

How to use your Clay

First work clean, brush up the area you are going to be working in as you don't want dirt and grit getting blown onto the surface of the paint. Thoroughly wash and dry your car, ensure you are not working in direct sun light and the surface of the car is cool, as the clay will not perform well in hot conditions, the heat is not as much of an issue for the clay towel as it is for the poly clay.

You will not need all of your clay bar at once to do one car, a 200g bar can be cut into three pieces. When the piece of clay is black and won't be used on paint anymore demote it to glass or alloy wheel duty. The clay towel is more expensive to buy at the time but will far out last the poly clay.

NB If you drop your clay bar bin it, as it will pick up dirt that you do not want to rub over your paint, if you drop the clay towel just wash it out.

Knead the clay to soften it, if the weather is cold pop the clay into some warm water to help soften it. Now flatten it out into a small round pancake like shape. Place the pancake in your hand just behind your finger tips so that they are hanging over the edge. If you have it on your finger tips the pressure will wear through the clay quickly as there is a lot of pressure on a small area. Now spray a 2' x 2' area with your clay lubricant and **slowly and gently** begin to rub the clay over the surface, you may feel the clay stick at first but it should break free, remember to use plenty of clay lubricant as you do not want the clay bar marring the surface. The paint should be silky smooth, wipe the lubricant away with a microfiber cloth and move on to the next spot until you have completed the whole car. Frequently inspect the face of the clay, once it becomes dirty fold it over and knead to expose a fresh surface again. Then wipe of the residue with a clean quality microfiber towel.

Storage

As said above once your clay becomes dirty and you do not want to use it on your paint use it on your wheels and glass. Store your clay in the container it came in or in a re-sealable plastic bag, just give it a quick spray of clay lubricant before putting it away.

Summary

It's not rocket science is it? If you have never done it before I bet your wondering why not. Remember to use plenty of lubricant, and slow and steady wins the race. Nice slow sweeps over the paint with your clay. You will be amazed at the amount of crud you remove if you have never done this before. The modern clay towels work out less expensive in the long run, are easier and quicker to use and can be reused if dropped. Now you have your paint all nice and smooth you are going to want to want to polish and protect it or at the very least protect, as the clay will have removed any wax or sealant that was applied.