Preparing the Four Pans

The four-dishpan method of washing dishes has been around for many years. It is still a mainstay in the Boy Scouts who frequently use this method during overnight camping trips.

As you may expect, the four-dishpan method uses three dishpans. We have 18-quart plastic dishpans for this purpose. They are 18″L x 15″W x 7″H. Most anything large enough to hold water and submerge plates and pans in will work. In a pinch, we have used 5-gallon buckets.

The First Pan: Prewash

The very first dishpan is for pre-washing the dishes. This water can be cold, and will keep your warm wash water useable longer by removing all the large bits of food.

The Second Pan: Wash

The other wash bin should have warm water. Heat some hot water over the same heat source that you used for cooking your food. Heat quite a bit since you will need to fill the first tub approximately 1/2 full with hot water. You will also need some hot water for the second tub as well; more on that later.

The water in the first tub should be pretty warm, not lukewarm, but not scalding either. There is not need to scald your hands, but cleaning is easier and better with warm to hot water.

Add a little dish soap to the water. You do not need a lot of dish soap; just a small squirt will do. There is no need to have it look like a bubble bath. We only need enough soap to help the water bind with any grease left on the dishes.

The Third Pan: Rinse

The second pan is our rinsing station. It should be filled approximately 1/2 full of hot water. It does not have to be scalding hot, but it should be very more than just warm. Do not add soap to this pan. Its only purpose is to remove soapy water from the dishes.

The Fourth Pan: Sanitize

Fill the final pan 1/2 way full of water. The temperature of the water in this pan is not terribly important. If it is summertime, I will use ambient temperature water. In the wintertime when my hand are cold, I typically use water that is about the same temperature as the first pan.

To the water in the third pan, add approximately 1 capful of chlorine bleach.  This will sanitize the dishes and help prevent you from getting sick the next time you eat off of them.

Washing Dishes

Immediately after you have prepared your meal start heating water for the four-dishpan method of cleaning. Allow the water to heat while you enjoy eating your meal.

After eating, scrape all food particles off your plates, bowls, pots and pans. They should “look” clean before you start washing them. Dispose of the excess food properly (away from your campsite when camping, etc).

After rinsing, submerge the dish in the fourth pan. Allow it to soak for approximately 2 minutes. This will allow the chlorine bleach to sanitize the dish and kill any microscopic organisms that may make you sick.

Drying Dishes

After the dishes have been washed, the must be dried. It is best to allow the dishes to air dry. Drying with a towel allows the possibility of recontamination the dishes with potentially harmful bacteria. Air-drying eliminates that possibility.

To air dry, you can set the dishes on a sanitized surface and allow the moister to evaporate. Better yet, you can place them in a mesh bag our “dish hammock” and allow them to hang dry from a clothesline. The latter allows the gravity and evaporation to work together to dry the dishes.

Cleaning the Dishpans

After all of your cooking utensils are clean, it is time to clean the dishwashing stations. Clean them in the same order that you used to wash your dishes. Pour the soapy water out of the first pan. Take care to dispose if it properly. At home, you can pour it down the drain. When camping, make sure you pour it out away from your campsite and at least 100 feet from a stream or other water source.

Next, pour the rinse water from the second pan into the first to remove the soapy water from the first pan. Finally, use the sanitized water from the third pan to sanitize the first two pans.