# How to Spot Grease Buildup in Kitchen Filters, Fans, and Ducts

Grease buildup is rarely a single dramatic event. It collects in thin layers, catches dust and cooking residue, then slowly changes how an exhaust system looks, smells, and performs. Spotting it early helps kitchen staff plan cleaning before a minor coating turns into a sticky, fire-prone deposit.

The safest approach is a visual and sensory inspection from ground level, with equipment shut down and cooled. Anything that needs ladders, roof access, panel removal, electrical work, or chemical treatment belongs with a qualified professional. The steps below focus on what can be noticed without putting anyone at risk.

## Start with the hood canopy and the air path

Stand back from the hood canopy and look across the underside, edges, and landing areas. Fresh grease often appears as a light sheen, especially near the filters and along seams where vapor rises. Older buildup looks darker, tackier, and may hold specks of dust or food particles. Pay attention to areas where the metal finish has lost its even tone.

Watch for drips or streaks. Grease that has condensed on a cool surface can run downward, leaving a trail that is darker at the bottom. A sticky patch on the outside of the hood may point to residue escaping from a filter gap or a seam that no longer seals well.

Also notice how cooking smells move through the room. Some odor is normal in a busy kitchen, but lingering smoky or oily smells near the hood can mean airflow is being restricted. If smoke hangs under the canopy instead of being drawn upward, the filters, fan, or duct path may be loaded.



## Check the grease filters in order

Grease filters are the first collection point for airborne oil. With the system off and the filters cool, inspect each one in place before handling. Look for a glossy film, brown staining, or a mesh surface that no longer shows clear gaps. A filter that looks evenly dark across its face may simply be holding a normal load, while thick deposits at the bottom edge often show that grease has pooled.

Next, check for warping or loose frames. A bent filter can sit poorly in its track and let grease pass around it. Watch for gaps along the sides, a frame that rocks when touched, or handles that feel unusually greasy. These details matter because a clean-looking filter cannot do its job if it does not sit properly.

When filters are removed for routine cleaning by trained staff, the underside and the filter tracks can reveal more. Sticky residue in the track is a sign that oil has been bypassing the filter or dripping from it. A layer that smears rather than wipes away suggests the deposit has begun to oxidize and harden, which usually needs a stronger cleaning method than routine washing.

Kitchen Hood Cleaning and Maintenance | Clean Hood Pros is a useful reference point when comparing routine filter care with deeper exhaust system maintenance, since the two are not the same task. Clean filters can improve capture at the hood, but they do not remove grease that has already reached the fan or ductwork.

## Listen and look at the exhaust fan from a safe position

Fan problems often show up as a change in sound or vibration. With the system operating under normal kitchen procedures, notice whether the fan has developed a new hum, rattle, or uneven pitch. A load of grease on fan blades can disturb balance. That imbalance may be felt as vibration through nearby surfaces or heard as a rhythmic noise.

Do not open the fan housing, reach into the fan, or inspect it from a roof or elevated platform unless that work is part of a qualified service visit. A visual check from an accessible, safe position can still reveal warning signs. Look around the fan housing for oil stains, dark runoff, or residue at seams. Those marks can mean grease is collecting inside or escaping past a gasket.

Airflow clues are just as useful. If the kitchen feels warmer than usual, smoke clears slowly, or the hood seems weak at the cooking line, the fan may be struggling against a restricted duct or a dirty blade assembly. These signs do not prove where the restriction is, but they tell you where to focus the next professional inspection.



Kitchen Hood Cleaning and Maintenance | Clean Hood Pros fits into this stage of thinking because exhaust performance depends on the whole path, not just the visible hood surfaces. A

fan can be mechanically sound and still perform poorly when grease has built up upstream or downstream.

## Inspect accessible ductwork surfaces without opening the system

Ductwork often gives the clearest signs at accessible joints, outside терминалы, and areas near the fan. From floor level or another safe position, look for dark patches, shiny streaks, or sticky residue around seams. Grease tends to collect where airflow changes direction or where ducts connect, because particles strike those surfaces more often.

Watch for stains on nearby ceilings, walls, or exterior surfaces. A dark halo around a duct penetration can suggest leakage or condensation carrying grease. Discoloration that keeps returning after ordinary cleaning deserves attention, since it may be fed by residue inside the duct.

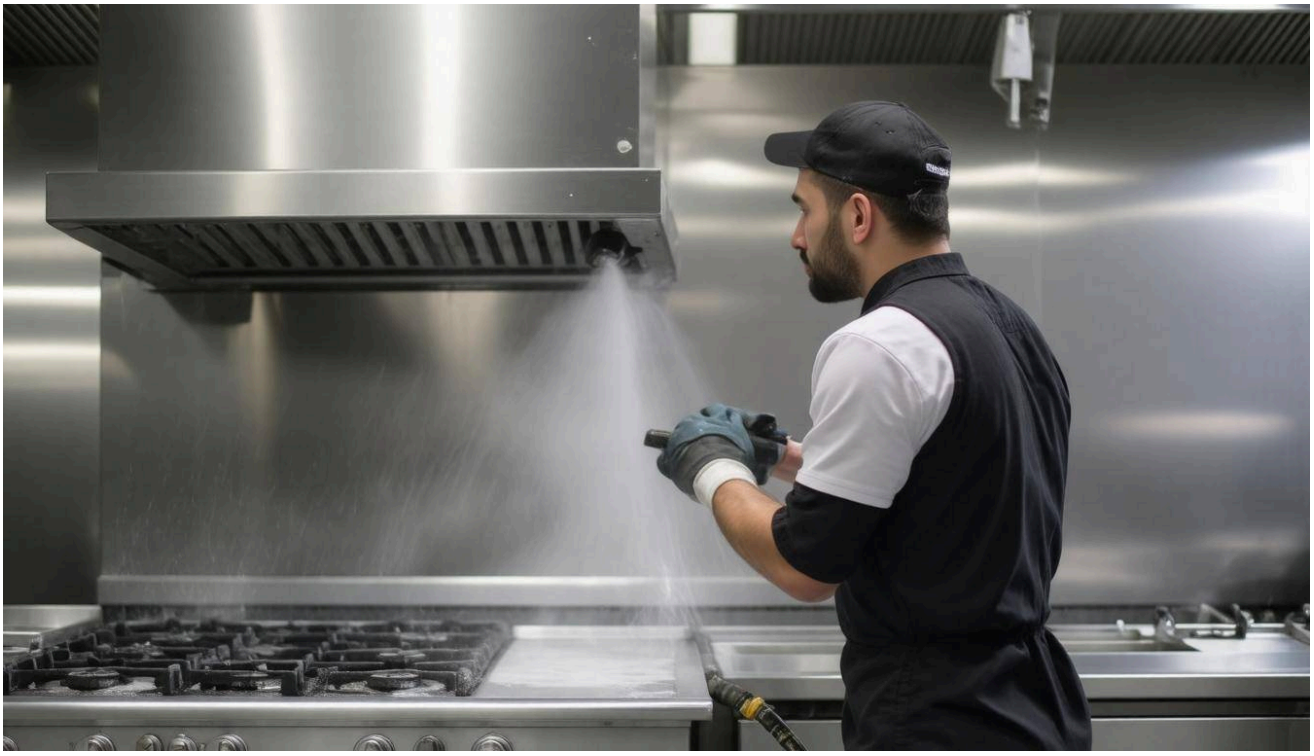
Temperature and odor can also provide clues. A duct that runs hot to the touch near an accessible section may be carrying heat that should be moving more freely. Oily smells around a duct joint can point to accumulated residue. Any inspection that requires removing panels, climbing above ceiling tiles, or working near roof equipment should be left to a qualified professional.

## Know the difference between surface dirt and grease buildup

Not every dark mark is dangerous grease. Dust, cooking splatter, and ordinary wear can make metal look dull. Grease buildup has a distinct character: it feels slick or tacky, holds particles, and may leave a faint oily film on a glove or paper towel. It often collects in corners, seams, filter frames, and places where airflow slows.

Use judgment before deciding that a surface only needs routine wiping. A light film on the outside of equipment may be cleaned during normal kitchen housekeeping. Thick deposits, repeated drips, sticky tracks, or odor that returns quickly are signs that the exhaust system needs a deeper assessment. With professional hood cleaning, the goal is not only a better appearance. It is also reducing fuel that can collect in hidden parts of the system.

Degreaser and pressure washing have a place in trained hands, but they are not casual fixes for every surface. Harsh chemicals can damage metal, loosen seals, or leave residues where food is prepared. High-pressure water can drive grease into gaps or create slips and overspray. A qualified service provider chooses the method based on the part, the deposit, and the safety boundaries of the site.



## Record what you notice and act on patterns

A single mark may not mean much. The same mark appearing week after week usually does. Keep a simple internal record of filter condition, hood streaks, fan noise, airflow complaints, and duct-area staining. Note only observable facts and avoid guesswork about cause. Patterns help a service technician understand whether the problem is at the filter, the fan, or deeper in the ductwork.

Set a practical routine for checks that require no special access. Look at filters during normal handling, glance at the hood canopy after busy cooking periods, and pay attention to changes in sound or smell. If the system shows several warning signs at once, stop relying on surface cleaning alone and arrange a professional inspection.

Grease containment works best when small problems are noticed before they spread. Clean filters, steady fan sound, clear airflow, and dry duct surfaces are all useful signs. When those signs change, early action keeps the kitchen safer and makes maintenance easier to plan.