



## WHITE PAPER

# Passivation: Is it really necessary?

by Christie L. Jones, Market Development Manager  
SPIROL International Corporation

Stainless steels are called “stainless” because in the presence of oxygen, they develop a thin, hard adherent film of chromium oxide that protects the metal from corrosion. In the event the surface is scratched, this protective layer develops again.

During handling and processing operations such as forming, machining, and tumbling, particles of iron or tool steel may be embedded in or smeared on the surfaces of the stainless steel component. Although stainless steel is highly corrosion resistant, the iron contamination induced during fabrication is subject to rust and corrosion. If allowed to remain, these particles may corrode and produce rust spots or stains on the surface of the stainless steel. While these particles might cause surface blemishes, the base material remains unchanged, and it maintains its basic mechanical performance characteristics.

It has been traditionally thought that passivation is the standard method of cleaning stainless steel; when in fact passivation is not a cleaning process at all. The passivation process removes any residual carbon from the surface of the part by the use of nitric and citric acids. SPIROL utilizes citric acid. The acid dissolves the surface imperfections, such as embedded tool steel or other free iron particles. However, the sole purpose of passivation is to remove embedded iron; not to clean the part. Passivation will not remove any oils or other non-ferrous contaminants. These other contaminants are removed through a vigorous cleaning process, prior to the passivation process. William Snyder wrote in the March 1983 issue of *Plating/Anodizing Forum* in *Industrial Finishing*: “Thousands of dollars are wasted every month by manufactures going through complete passivation cycles when all they need is a proper cleaning.” In addition to proper cleaning, the use of carbide tooling minimizes iron contaminants in the stainless steel. SPIROL has implemented many carbide tools in order to reduce tool wear, and this has a side benefit of minimizing the particles of embedded tool steel.

SPIROL International is dedicated to helping our customers reduce component costs. One way to reduce costs is to eliminate non-value-added processes; and passivation tends to be one of these. Passivation is a costly operation and is not environmentally friendly. We recommend that a review of the customer’s application requirements be done in order to determine whether or not passivation is really necessary for each particular application. Some typical applications where passivation is appropriate is in medical implants or instruments, components used in the food or drug industry, fuel system applications, and any application requiring a clean environment.

Excluding the above mentioned applications, and others where the user deems it appropriate, there are thousands of applications in which passivation is not necessary. Remember that any residual carbon may cause *superficial* blemishing, however this should not impede the corrosion resistance of the base metal, or impact the basic performance of the part.

The cost differential between a passivated and non-passivated part is approximately 10%. If the customer’s application does not require passivation, you may recommend a part with a plain finish versus passivated.

**SPIROL** Application Engineers will review your application needs and work with you to recommend the optimum solution. One way to start the process is to visit our **Optimal Application Engineering** portal at **SPIROL.co.uk**.

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## Technical Centres

**Europe** **SPIROL United Kingdom**  
17 Princewood Road  
Corby, Northants  
NN17 4ET United Kingdom  
Tel. +44 1536 444800  
Fax. +44 1536 203415

**SPIROL France**  
Cit  de l’Automobile ZAC Croix Blandin  
18 Rue L na Bernstein  
51100 Reims, France  
Tel. +33 3 26 36 31 42  
Fax. +33 3 26 09 19 76

**SPIROL Germany**  
Ottostr. 4  
80333 Munich, Germany  
Tel. +49 89 4 111 905 71  
Fax. +49 89 4 111 905 72

**SPIROL Spain**  
08940 Cornell  de Llobregat  
Barcelona, Spain  
Tel. +34 93 669 31 78  
Fax. +34 93 193 25 43

**SPIROL Czech Republic**  
Sokola T my 743/16  
Ostrava-Mari nsk  Hory 70900  
Czech Republic  
Tel. +420 417 537 979

**SPIROL Poland**  
Aleja 3 Maja 12  
00-391 Warszawa, Poland  
Tel. +48 510 039 345

**Americas** **SPIROL International Corporation**  
30 Rock Avenue  
Danielson, Connecticut 06239 U.S.A.  
Tel. +1 860 774 8571  
Fax. +1 860 774 2048

**SPIROL Shim Division**  
321 Remington Road  
Stow, Ohio 44224 U.S.A.  
Tel. +1 330 920 3655  
Fax. +1 330 920 3659

**SPIROL Canada**  
3103 St. Etienne Boulevard  
Windsor, Ontario N8W 5B1 Canada  
Tel. +1 519 974 3334  
Fax. +1 519 974 6550

**SPIROL Mexico**  
Avenida Avante #250  
Parque Industrial Avante Apodaca  
Apodaca, N.L. 66607 Mexico  
Tel. +52 81 8385 4390  
Fax. +52 81 8385 4391

**SPIROL Brazil**  
Rua Mafalda Barnab  Soliane, 134  
Comercial Vit ria Martini, Distrito Industrial  
CEP 13347-610, Indaiatuba, SP, Brazil  
Tel. +55 19 3936 2701  
Fax. +55 19 3936 7121

**Asia Pacific** **SPIROL Asia Headquarters**  
1st Floor, Building 22, Plot D9, District D  
No. 122 HeDan Road  
Wai Gao Qiao Free Trade Zone  
Shanghai, China 200131  
Tel. +86 21 5046 1451  
Fax. +86 21 5046 1540

**SPIROL Korea**  
160-5 Seokchon-Dong  
Songpa-gu, Seoul, 138-844, Korea  
Tel. +86 21 5046-1451  
Fax. +86 21 5046-1540

email: [info-uk@spirol.com](mailto:info-uk@spirol.com)

**SPIROL.co.uk**