



THE THREAD

Unraveling the Mysteries of Fibers, Fabrics and Floorcoverings

FABRIC MAINTENANCE... Upholstery Cleaning

General Theory

The cleaning of interior textiles is a very interesting and challenging field. As you will see in this article, it is not for the faint of heart.

Wall-to-wall carpet is a relatively forgiving material. Less-than-expert cleaning technicians can and do cause problems when they clean carpets, but the incidence of these mistakes pales in comparison to the type and frequency of mistakes these technicians make on upholstered furnishings. The reasons are simple when you consider a few basics.

The vast majority of carpets are created using just three different fibers, nylon, olefin and wool, with only a minimal number of dye systems and constructions. Upholstery fabrics, on the other hand are created from more than a dozen different fibers. These fibers may be used alone or in combination, in plain or "fancy" weaves.

Finishes on upholstery fabrics add another dimension of complexity. A basic silk fabric might be cleaned one way, while a silk fabric with a moiré

finish would likely be cleaned very differently.

The Methods

There are two basic methods used in cleaning upholstery fabrics: "wet cleaning" and "dry cleaning".

"People clean. Machines and chemicals merely assist the process."



In wet cleaning, water-based detergents and spot removers are used, and the primary "rinsing" agent used in the process is also water. This method is very similar to hot water extraction cleaning for carpets.

The dry cleaning method utilizes solvent-soluble detergents and essentially water-free solvents such as odorless mineral spirits.

Because there is no water involved, the likelihood of problems such as dye bleeding and shrinkage are greatly reduced.

So, Why Not Dry Clean Everything?

All things being considered, dry cleaning is easily the safest method for cleaning upholstery fabrics. Why then would we ever risk cleaning with water-based systems? Because dry cleaning is simply not as effective as wet cleaning.

Dry cleaning solvents, even when combined with detergents, are most effective on oil-based stains and soils. When a dog rubs against a sofa over and over, this creates a darker soiling condition which can be effectively removed through dry cleaning because much of the soiling is oily in nature.

However, water-borne soils and stains such as perspiration, drink spills, etc. usually require water-based cleaning chemicals to dissolve and remove them. "Like dissolves like" is a very simple way to describe this cleaning theory.

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The fact is that when a fabric is visibly soiled and needs more than minor attention, dry cleaning is not the method of choice. Even the best fabric dry cleaning equipment and chemicals cannot provide the overall level of cleaning performance that is available from water-based methods.

Fabric Evaluation

The process by which a particular fabric is evaluated prior to cleaning is an important one. The first step in the evaluation is pre-inspection.

Using a sofa as an example, the entire piece is first carefully inspected for things such as overall soiling level, spots, yellowing, fading and fabric deterioration (rips, holes, pilling, pulled yarns, etc.). If there are zippered cushions, these are opened and the inside of the cushion is inspected for upholsterer's marks (which might bleed through during cleaning), fabric backcoatings and, especially on down cushions, flame retardant-treated cotton tickings which might cause pH-related problems.

Any unusual problems found in the pre-inspection are noted and are brought to the client's

attention before the actual cleaning begins.

Once this initial assessment has been made, it's time for "spot testing." This is a critical part of the pre-cleaning process. Unfortunately, it is also the step most often skipped by cleaners.

In the spot testing process, the cleaning chemical(s) to be used are applied to an inconspicuous area of the fabric, such as the zipper side of a cushion. The chemical is left to dry naturally (usually about 30 minutes to an hour).

After drying, the area where the chemical was applied is evaluated for any changes. If significant changes have occurred, e.g., the bleeding of one or more dyes, the fabric may not be wet-cleanable. In these cases, the cleaning technician will decide whether or not dry cleaning is a viable alternative.

As explained earlier, dry cleaning is successful on fabrics where the overall level of soiling is relatively minor. A light-colored fabric with moderate to heavy soiling would not be a candidate for this type of cleaning. If the level of soiling suggests less

than desirable cleaning results, this is discussed with the client before cleaning begins.

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