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Dry Cleaning 101

What goes on in that great beyond when you drop off your clothes, and how to avoid common dry-cleaning problems



Robyn Lehr

Problem: You're mystified by the whole process. Is dry cleaning really dry?

Solution: Actually, it isn't dry at all. Your clothes get plenty wet in what look like large, front-loading washing machines, explains Steve Boorstein, a Bethesda, Maryland–based cleaning expert known as the Clothing Doctor. However, instead of water, the process typically uses either a petroleum-based solvent or perchloroethylene (perc), a synthetic solvent. The dry-cleaning solvents remove oily stains without shrinking most fabrics. Over time, though, perc's aggressive cleaning power can weaken or dissolve fabric glues and finishes. Your clothes are cleaned and dried in the same machine, all in about 55 minutes, after which an employee generally reinspects them for stains. If any remain, he'll spot-treat and clean the item again before pressing or steaming and then packaging it for pickup or delivery.

Problem: You're concerned about the chemicals used in dry cleaning.

Solution: Go organic. Perc's impact on the environment and on humans (it's a suspected carcinogen at very high doses) as well as its odor have given rise to three eco-friendly alternatives. The most popular of them, recommended by several experts we spoke to and now used in about 500 locations nationwide, is a silicone-based solvent called GreenEarth that works in modified perc machines. Gentler than perc (though still being tested for cancer hazards), it doesn't strip clothes of their off-the-rack finishes, says Tim Maxwell, president of GreenEarth Cleaning (www.greenearthcleaning.com). The second alternative, used by the 70 or so shops in the Hangers Cleaners chain, employs high-pressure machines and liquid carbon dioxide mixed with special detergents. And, finally, there's "wet cleaning," in which dry-clean-only fabrics are laundered with plain water in computer-controlled washers. A Consumer Reports test found silicone- and carbon dioxide–based cleaning results superior to those of perc; wet cleaning was a bit spottier.



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Problem: You have dry-clean-only clothes that are wrinkled but not dirty. Is it advisable to take them to the cleaner for a simple pressing?

Solution: Not if you're talking about items that touch your skin directly. If there are traces of perspiration on a blouse, for example, the hot steam may cause them to oxidize and set, and you'll end up with a permanently stained or sweaty-smelling garment. Pressing alone works fine for things like suit jackets and tablecloths — but note that just pressing will cost anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of the price of a full cleaning, because most of it is done by hand.

Problem: Your neighborhood cleaner charges a lot more than the one near your office, and you're worried you're paying extra for no good reason.

Solution: Rest assured, the difference between passable and premium cleaners is evident in the prices they ask — and the results they deliver. Quality cleaners take extra time when handling delicate garments, spot-treating trouble areas, and reinspecting for stains, and they'll often hand press clothes for the best drape and body. If an item does not look perfect, they'll touch it up or send it through the process again until it does. Any top-notch cleaner, including members of Leading Cleaners Internationale, typically offers a 100 percent safe-cleaning guarantee. "If we lose it, we pay you; if we damage it, we pay you. No questions asked," says cleaning expert Steve Boorstein. That level of service helps explain why one establishment may charge five times as much as another to clean the same blouse. (If you're not sure what guarantee your cleaner offers, ask. If the cleaner offers a complete one, he will be glad to tell you about the guarantee.) Women's garments, as a rule, cost more to clean than men's because their details, construction, fabrics, and delicate finishes often require greater attention and care. "We study each garment, we remove buttons, we clean by hand, and we guarantee all our work," says Charles Ickes, manager of the New York City-based Madame Paulette, which cleaned Princess Diana's gowns for a museum tour last year. "The cost of our service is inherent in what we do." (Madame Paulette charges about \$25 to clean a blouse, \$50 for a suit.)



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Problem: At the last minute, you decide you need your dress back, clean or unclean — but the cleaner doesn't have it on-site.

Solution: Ask an employee if the cleaning is done on-site. If there is a chance you could want your clothes the same day, steer clear of storefront "dry stores," which don't have cleaning machines on the premises, says cleaning expert Steve Boorstein.

Problem: You waited a few days to bring in a jacket with a stain, and now the cleaner can't remove it.

Solution: Improve your chances next time by taking stained items to the cleaner within 48 hours. Then, tell all: what the stain is (even if it's blood, sweat, or urine) and exactly what you did to it. "If you know the composition of a stain — whether it's earth-based, protein-based, or oil-based — we can use the right method to remove it from the start," says Charles Ickes, manager of the New York City-based Madame Paulette.



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Problem: Your suit came back from the cleaner torn and with two broken buttons.

Solution: Structural damage, such as broken zippers and ripped seams, can be due to manufacturing defects in the garment, according to analysts at the International Fabricare Institute (IFI), the industry's leading trade group. Reputable cleaners will notice such problems — and repair them — before packing up your cleaned items. (They can also offer advice about returning to the retailer or manufacturer a dry-clean-only garment whose dyes, for example, bleed during dry cleaning.) The same goes for clothes damaged by an employee, such as a pant leg that gets caught on a pressing machine and tears. Your cleaner should call the damage to your attention and offer to repair it to your satisfaction; if a repair isn't possible, he should replace the item or reimburse you in cash within a week. He'll no doubt consult the Fair Claims Guide, published by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), to gauge the value of the garment. If you spot the problem at home, tell your cleaner and trust he'll make good. "The test of a good cleaner is what it does in your time of need," cleaning expert Steve Boorstein says. If you feel your problem hasn't been dealt with properly, ask to speak to the owner, or contact your local Better Business Bureau for help in resolving the complaint. The Better Business Bureau handles such cases all the time, offering mediation and arbitration. What's more, the IFI extends membership to all Better Business Bureau branches, which can use the trade group's resources, including analysts and experts, to determine where the fault lies.

Problem: The cleaner can't find your clothes.

Solution: "A dry-cleaning operation is a lot like 52-card pickup," Boorstein says. Cleaners usually work on clothes in groups of 50 to 100 pieces, and 5 or 10 items always get shunted aside for recleaning or special pressing. Sometimes these stragglers lose their way and aren't returned to their assigned lot. On rare occasions, paired items get "misassembled," or garments are returned to the wrong customer. Either way, give your cleaner two to three weeks to find your clothes; they'll usually turn up. If not, the cleaner may ask for a purchase receipt for the lost garment and information about its age and condition. The valuation protocol is the same as for damaged items: He'll consult the FTC claims guide to appraise your loss, then pay you for it; and a good cleaner may throw in a free future service.

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