

Keeping Your Clothes Fit: The Purpose of Dry Cleaning

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The objective of dry cleaning is to restore an item of clothing back to its original "like new" condition. This is accomplished in two steps: stain removal and finishing.

Stain Removal: Stains are removed from fabric by machine-cleaning the item at room temperature in a detergent aid and perchloroethylene or petroleum solvents to flush out or dissolve soils. The solvent does not soak into the fabric, preventing the swelling and shrinking of fibers which can occur when an item is immersed in water.

Soil types basically fall into three categories: water-soluble, such as body fluids, sugars and salts; solvent-soluble, including oils and greases; and insoluble which can usually be flushed away from fabric by mechanical action. A detergent aid can be added to the dry cleaning solvent to enhance the removal of water-soluble soils; however, the degree of removal is dependent upon the type of detergent used and the care taken to control moisture throughout the process. Solvent and detergents are then removed from the clothing by draining, spinning and tumbling dry with hot air.

Finishing: The finishing process usually involves steaming, pressing and cooling the garment to remove wrinkles and keep fibers in place. Although pressing dry cleaned fabrics requires less effort than water cleaned fabrics, a great deal of skill and training is required.

Certain types of fabrics, such as wool, rayon, silk and linen, should always be dry cleaned since they tend to shrink in water. The protein fibers in wool and silk also tend to degrade when laundered or exposed to heat. Additionally, the dyes used in wool, rayon and silk garments usually respond poorly to water. Most items containing linings or shoulder pads should also be dry cleaned due to a lower chance of shrinkage and distortion.

Occasionally, damage can occur during the dry cleaning process which is due to manufacturing procedures rather than the fault of the dry cleaner. For example, some metallic lamé fabrics are only surface coated and will dissolve during normal dry cleaning. Glue can also be dissolved by solvents, causing ornamentation such as sequins, beads and button inserts to be lost. Additionally, some buttons and sequins are dyed with surface colorants which can bleed from heat or moisture, permanently staining the fabric.

As an informed consumer, there are several things you can do to assist your dry cleaner in maintaining your wardrobe:

- Take stained garments to the dry cleaner as quickly as possible, as some stains can be permanently set by exposure to light, heat and air.
- Always inform your dry cleaner of locations and type of stains on your garments when you drop them off. A trained "spotter" inspects each garment closely before the cleaning process, but some soils, such as beverages containing sugar, will not show up until after the cleaning process is completed.
- Some garment manufacturers provide cleaning instructions on the hang tag. Retain this tag and share the information with your dry cleaner when you have the item cleaned.
- Have your clothing dry cleaned regularly to ensure longevity. Trace soils such as dust particles and perspiration can detract from the attractiveness of your garments.