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Green carpet care

Environmentally preferred cleaning protects health, saves money.

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By Jaime Van Vuren

From the April 2006 edition of Cleaning & Maintenance Management magazine. For a free introductory subscription, [click here](#).

Millions of square feet of carpet are cleaned every day throughout North America, and there have been relatively few reports of health problems or reactions because of the chemicals, procedures or equipment used.

However, such problems do occur.

They can run the gamut from mild skin, eye and respiratory irritations to severe asthma attacks, especially among children, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems.

Because of the potential for such problems, an increasing number of industry experts are encouraging carpet cleaning professionals to transfer from traditional cleaning products, chemicals and equipment to more environmentally preferable products that are healthier for workers and building occupants.

Certified-Green carpet cleaning chemicals have been developed, and low-moisture carpet extractors that are more environmentally preferable have become commonplace.

In addition, the Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) has introduced a Seal of Approval program that evaluates how well carpet cleaning chemicals and carpet extractors work while also measuring the amount of residual moisture left in carpets after cleaning — a factor that can potentially affect health and the indoor environment.

Potentially harmful

Many of the traditional chemicals used to clean carpets are highly

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alkaline and contain aggressive enzymes and disinfectants.

A standard carpet cleaning formula can contain such powerful and potentially harmful ingredients as N-methyl 2-pyrrolidone, isopropyl alcohol, 2-butoxyethanol, d-limonene sodium bicarbonate, sodium citrate, sodium phosphate and sodium silicate.

These ingredients are found in a variety of products and can usually be used without incident. But, when improperly used or diluted or when used in proximity to people who are chemical-sensitive, they can cause harm to the skin, eyes and respiratory tract and result in health consequences.

Additionally, carpet cleaning solutions may contain anionic and nonionic surfactants (a class of synthetic detergents) that help “wet out” the carpet surface so that soils can be more easily flushed out and removed during the extraction process.

Many carpet cleaning formulas also contain dyes, polymers, enzymes, bleaches and solvents made from alcohols, esters and glycol ethers — all of which can potentially cause health consequences.

Cleaning the Green way

If cleaning professionals want to clean carpets the Green way, they should consider the following four things:

1. Select chemicals that have won the Seal of Approval from CRI or have been certified by either the Environmental ChoiceM Program or Green Seal®.
2. Use hot water extraction as part of their overall carpet cleaning strategy. Although there are several ways to clean carpets, most experts agree that carpets should be hot-water extracted one or more times per year, depending on use and traffic, to keep them looking their best. This system thoroughly removes deeply embedded soils and contaminants and helps protect carpet fibers.
3. Avoid over-wetting carpets. Putting too much water and chemical into carpet or improperly matching the two cleaning components can actually foster health-related problems and allergic reactions. Over-wetting can prevent chemical and water from being thoroughly vacuumed out, leaving behind residue. Excess moisture can also lead to the development of mold and mildew.
4. Use high heat. Heating the cleaning solution to more than 200 degrees Fahrenheit allows for more efficient cleaning. High heat reduces the surface tension of water, enabling faster, more efficient cleaning. Heat also accelerates the molecular activity of carpet cleaning chemicals, which helps remove soil from carpets faster. This means less dwell time is required for chemicals and, in some cases, less frequent cleaning is

necessary; therefore, there is less human exposure to chemicals.

Jamie Van Vuren is president of Bee Line Building Service and Supply, Schaumburg, IL, which was founded by her father in the 1950s. Van Vuren may be reached at jamie@beelineimage.com. For more information on the Carpet and Rug Institute, visit www.carpet-rug.com.

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