

What really goes on after you hand over your clothes? Steve Boorstein, who ran a high-end dry-cleaning company for 16 years, dishes the dirt—and offers a few must-know tips.

do your homework “Dry cleaners are not mind readers, and they’re not perfect,” he cautions. Every dry cleaner will treat your garment a little differently. “Some will inspect it thoroughly, others won’t. Some read labels, some just say, ‘Well, it looks like a dry-cleanable material.’” To get the best care, read your labels beforehand, make sure the dry cleaner is aware of the fabrication, and point out any issues (especially stains) you need him to focus on.

know how they work Dry cleaners put items into a front-loading machine that uses dry-cleaning solution and detergent. None of the cleansers are water-based; instead, they use an oil-based or chlorinated solvent that flushes out greasy, waxy buildup (body oils, machine oils, food grease). (Some cleaners are becoming more eco-friendly by switching to less toxic and polluting solvents, like one based on CO₂.) Stain deterrents, water repellents and sizing (a chemical finish used for crispness) may be added. Because only a trace amount of water is used, fading and shrinking aren’t an issue—and clothes come out dry. Cleaners inspect items, press and steam them, reinspect and bag them.

don't expect miracles While your dry cleaner only needs 10 or 20 minutes to get out a grease stain that might take you 50 washes at home, it’s harder for dry cleaning to remove serious body odor and water-based stains (sweat, coffee). Show him these messes anyway; he’ll likely steam them or use a water-based chemical, but the results may still not be 100 percent. “The industry is working harder to make solutions more effective,” says Boorstein.



Kathleen Huddy,
GHRi textiles, paper
& plastics director

ASK OUR EXPERT

Q We have an “organic” dry cleaner in town. Is it better than a regular one?

A: There aren’t any standards for “organic” in terms of dry cleaning. Likely, it means they don’t use perchloroethylene (perc), the solvent used by 80 percent of dry cleaners. While perc is not known to cause problems to the wearer, if improperly handled it can pollute air, contaminate water and soil, and irritate skin and eyes. Since 2006, the EPA has required dry cleaners in residential buildings to phase out perc by 2020—probably why you’re seeing “organic” ones.

If your cleaners are perc-free, they might use a carbon dioxide method—pricier but less risky, and as good on all but lipstick and motor oil. Or they could use a wet cleaning method that’s safe for dry-clean-only materials (not wool and fur); in rare cases it can cause fading or shrinkage.

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Dry-Cleaning Dilemma

Q Can some items marked DRY CLEAN ONLY be hand washed?

—Becky Sharp, *The Woodlands, Texas*

A According to federal law, clothing manufacturers must label each garment with at least one safe cleaning method, and care tags tell you what’s best. Alternate methods may or may not be safe. If you try something other than the suggested method, you’ll have no recourse if you damage the garment.

I have taken the risk and had success with many of my silk blouses, washing them in the sink and then dry-cleaning them periodically.



“Green” Dry Cleaning

You’ve likely seen the signs touting “organic” and “eco-friendly” dry cleaning at local shops and, if you’re like us, wondered exactly what those words mean. That’s why GHRI took a closer look at the methods, their claims, and their cleaning abilities.

THE TRADITIONAL METHOD

PERC About 85 percent of all dry cleaners use perchloroethylene (perc), a powerful cleaning agent. When it’s used properly, very little is left on clothing, and it hasn’t been shown to harm wearers. But its use is strictly regulated because if not handled carefully, perc can be a toxic environmental pollutant and dangerous to workers, with chronic exposure causing serious health effects. To be cautious, we suggest removing plastic to air out garments before wearing or storing.

Because of the risks and a federal law phasing out perc cleaners located in residential buildings by 2020, a number of options have become more widely available.

THE BOTTOM LINE Claims of “green” and “organic” dry cleaning are currently unregulated, and often used improperly. By our analysis, Liquid CO₂ provides the best combo of environmental safety and good cleaning results. An experienced wet cleaner is also a worthwhile (and possibly easier-to-find) option.

THE ALTERNATIVES

WET CLEANING is a water- and detergent-based process that’s considered a safer alternative by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). However, wet cleaning may shrink or discolor some fabrics, such as rayon, acetate, and some silks.

LIQUID CO₂, a process also considered safer by the EPA, reuses most of its CO₂, so it shouldn’t contribute much to global warming.

LIQUID SILICONE, a proprietary cleanser called GreenEarth, claims to degrade to sand, CO₂, and water (a low pollution risk). Its health effects aren’t yet fully researched, which is why the EPA hasn’t taken a position on it.

PERC-ALTERNATIVE hydrocarbon solvents are an easy swap for cleaners, as they can continue to use existing perc machines. These petroleum-based chemicals must be handled with care, but are engineered to biodegrade much more quickly than perc.

HOW WELL DO THEY CLEAN?

We stained silk blouses, white cotton shirts, and wool skirts and took them to the five types of cleaners, with instructions not to pretreat. How the five methods did—from best to worst.

GreenEarth’s silicone proved to be the cleaning champ, conquering coffee, lipstick, and oil with ease. It also removed most of our wine stains, but wasn’t great at zapping ink from silk.

CO₂ cleaning erased lipstick, oil, and coffee from all three fabrics, but tended to leave some ink and wine behind. While all methods had minimal shrinkage, CO₂ had the least.

Perc, a known degreaser, fared best on oil and lipstick stains. Coffee also released readily, but ink and wine yielded less easily, particularly on silk and cotton.

Wet cleaners removed coffee and wine pretty well from all. Oil, lipstick, and ink (the toughest stain to remove) were less likely to come out.

Perc-alternative hydrocarbon dissolved oil and, in general, worked best on stains in wool. However, cotton and silk remained soiled, with ink and wine barely budging.

