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UP CLOSE: CARPET CARE

Cleaning Heavily-Soiled Carpeted Areas

The right blend of products and equipment can help keep customers' carpets in good standing order

By Cynthia Kincaid
Email the SM editors

The cost of replacing carpet today can be prohibitive. And with the dangers of flooding, leaking hot water heaters, bursting pipes and ground in soil, carpets are under siege. However, there are many proactive things that cleaning professionals can do to salvage flooded or dirty carpeting — not only preserve the existing carpeting, but in many cases, make it look new again.

Flooded Carpet

After heavy rains flooded many businesses throughout the Midwest in the spring of 2008, distributors were called in for advice on cleanup. One area of expertise that businesses relied upon mostly was how to properly clean flooded carpeting.

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Dealing with flooded carpet is a situation that needs immediate response. In these unfortunate situations, Kevin Ervin, sales manager for [Dee Janitorial Supply](#) in Chicago, suggests first drying the carpet with an industrial extractor and pulling it up from the floor. The next step he recommends is to dry the pad underneath with an extractor and pull it up off the floor, too. Next, Ervin suggests drying the sub-floor with a fan before cleaning the sub-floor with a neutralizing cleaner to kill any mold, mildew and bacteria before reinstalling the carpeting and padding.

In these situations, a wet carpet pad can act like a sponge and can cause big problems if left to dry on its own.

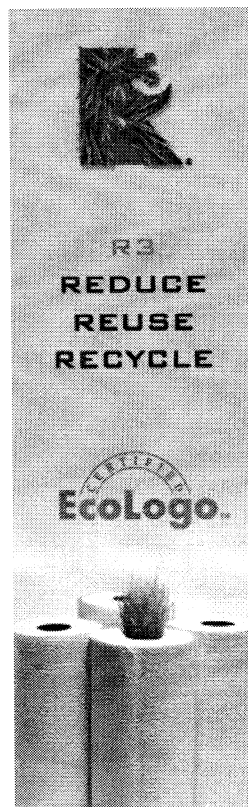
"If you can't get the pad totally dry, then you're just spinning your wheels," says Ervin. "It will be a breeding ground for mold and mildew."

When flooding from heavy rains occur, businesses are dealing with "gray water" one of three categories of water damage. With gray water — water that contains some degree of contamination — simply extracting the water from the carpet is only the first step in the cleaning process. Because it was

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contaminated with dirty water, the carpet also needs to be removed and treated with an antimicrobial solution. The pad also needs to be removed and possibly replaced, and the carpet needs to be cleaned after it has been put back into place.

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However, if the carpet has remained untreated for more than 48 hours, the water that has soaked the carpet is considered "black" — grossly unsanitary water that arises from sewage or other contaminated water — and the carpet in most cases cannot be salvaged.

Other water problems are "clear" or clean water — ones typically caused by broken water supply lines or tub and sink overflows, just to name a few examples. Clear water problems are the easiest of the three types of water damage to treat because it lacks contaminants, unlike gray and black water. However, this type of water damage must still be addressed with as much caution as gray or black water.

With flooded carpets, dirt typically settles deep into the fibers and often needs more than just water extraction for proper removal. Fritz Gast, executive vice president of [P.B. Gast & Sons](#) in Grand Rapids, Mich., recommends a deep agitation cleaning, using a dry system to thoroughly clean the carpet.

If a deep agitation cleaning still leaves dirt behind, Ken Waddell, salesman for Atlanta-based [Sikes Paper Company](#) recommends adding an acidic rinse to the tank, "so you can rinse out all the alkalinity that has settled into the carpet," he says. "You need to bring the pH down to four or five."

If the water damage to a carpet is great, all may still not be lost. Simply replacing the soaked pad underneath can sometimes salvage a carpet. But even though replacing a pad will involve labor costs, it may still be far cheaper than installing new carpeting, especially if the installation can be covered by insurance.

Even if a soaked carpet and pad have been thoroughly cleaned and dried, using an enzymatic carpet spray to attack leftover residue can provide an additional defense against future problems. These enzyme cleaners can be truly effective and should be used as an added precautionary measure because containing mold and mildew can be tricky.

"It can take a while for [mold and mildew] issues to come out," says Waddell. "A lot of times the odor is the first clue that you have a problem. Then you'll start seeing dark areas in the corners, and that's when you know you have mold growing."

Waddell also advises using an anti-microbial or anti-fungicide product to keep mold at bay.

Soil Removal

For flooded carpets that have been deeply soiled, a more aggressive cleaning approach will prove more effective.

"If old and soiled carpeting is not in the budget to replace, the absolute best method that I know of to treat it is called extreme vacuuming," says Waddell. "A lot of times, the vacuuming program has been so poor over the years, and you've got so much dry soil built up into the carpet, that when you introduce water to try to extract it, you just get mud."

In such a case, a carpet may need aggressive vacuuming over a period of days to extract the soil embedded deep in the fibers. Once accomplished, a program of pre-spraying, deep agitation with an alkaline cleaner and extraction with clean water is recommended.

"You might have to do that kind of cleaning a couple of times to reclaim the carpet," says Waddell. "But there is really no substitute in reclamation cleaning for good old-fashioned spray, agitate and rinse."

Extreme vacuuming and deep cleaning can sometimes bring back the most soiled of carpets. In fact, a carpet cannot be over vacuumed, especially in entry areas, says Waddell. Not vacuuming

enough, he says, is one of the biggest mistakes people make.

"One of the great things about carpet is that it hides soil," he says. "And one of the worst things about carpet is that it hides soil."

Waddell illustrates his point through one of his customers who had a large carpeted facility. For years, the customer neglected using a consistent vacuuming program, only cleaning the carpet using dry chemicals.

"There was so much residue in the carpet, that it took two weeks of very intense vacuuming, followed by three extractions, before we got the results that we wanted," says Waddell. "We had to really go after the residue that had built up over years. We put them on a strong maintenance program, and they learned the value of vacuuming."

Some soiled carpets can also benefit from an encapsulated cleaning process.

"A lot of times chemical residue builds up in a carpet, and when people walk across that carpet, the residue cleans the dirt off of people shoes, and you end up resoiling the same areas," says Keith Schneringer, marketing manager for [Waxie Sanitary Supply](#), San Diego. "Encapsulated carpet cleaning actually surrounds the dirt, encapsulating the dirt, and then sits on the carpet until it's vacuumed up. It prevents that vicious resoiling cycle."

Proper Equipment And Maintenance

Performing these clean-ups will require the use of proper agitating and extracting equipment, and, of course, a good vacuum cleaner. In most cases, additional investment in specialized equipment and products aren't needed.

"Use the extracting and encapsulated carpet cleaning products and equipment you already have," says Schneringer. "If you want to get fancy, use an industrial-strength pile lifter that stands the carpet pile up straight. You can go over the area with this pile lifter and see how much more dirt it picks up."

More often than not, people ignore their carpet, and carpet will hide a lot of sins, says Ervin.

"If we saw the amount of dirt that was in our carpets on a hardwood or tile floor, we would clean it up, but carpet hides that," he says.

This out-of-sight-out-of-mind reinforces perceptions that carpets need less maintenance, when, in fact, they need just as much, if not more care than hard flooring.

"[End users] should be vacuuming daily and top scrubbing stains that show," says Ervin. "And they should be doing a routine deep cleaning, either quarterly or monthly."

Installing and cleaning entry matting is also critically important in keeping carpets from being deeply soiled.

"Having a good entryway matting is your first line of defense in trying to make sure that you mitigate the amount of dirt and moisture coming in," says Schneringer.

In fact, the area around entryways is the highest traffic area and takes the most beating, says Waddell.

"The first 20 feet of any carpet is basically a walk-off mat and will function as a way to clean shoes," he says. "So the more durable the carpet in the entry area, and the more often you clean in those areas, the less soil you'll have traveling through the facility."

Cleaning deeply soiled carpeting doesn't have to be a difficult task. It just takes a consistent and effective approach that supports the integrity of a carpet care program.

"Sometimes people are looking for a magic bullet, but really it's just a combination of a lot of little things, like vacuuming and deep cleaning," says Schneringer. "If you're doing the little things along the way, then you can prevent having to do a massive cleaning later."

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