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Dry Cleaning

Despite its name, commercial dry cleaning is not actually a "dry" process. Clothes are immersed in a solvent, most commonly perchlorethylene (perc), instead of in water. Perc or other similar solvents are effective in the removal of oil and grease-based stains without damaging or shrinking sensitive fabrics, unlike a regular detergents and fabric softeners.

Perc is a persistent pollutant that has been identified as a contaminant and has potential human carcinogen. With perc being used as the #1 solvent in 85% of dry cleaners, it's a good idea to consider becoming more health and environmentally aware.

Eco-friendly Dry Cleaning

Although dry cleaning is the most significant source of perc contamination, there are multiple alternatives to cleaning without perc and being consciously aware of health and the environment. The three most recommended methods are:

1. **Wet Cleaning:** This method cleans fabrics using controlled amounts of water, special non-toxic biodegradable detergents, and computer-operated equipment. Although wet cleaning is more costly, the EPA considers this one of the safest professional cleaning methods available.
2. **Carbon Dioxide Cleaning:** In this method, liquid CO^2 is the primary solvent. If kept at room temperature, CO^2 can exist as a liquid while being stored in a closed system (machine) at an elevated pressure (EPA, 2010). CO^2 functions as an effective cleaning solvent when combined with various detergents. Once the cleaning cycle is complete, the CO^2 dry cleaning machine pulls the mixture of liquid CO^2 and detergents away from the clothing while cleaning and reusing the solution. No heat is required in this process.
3. **GreenEarth Cleaning:** Another recent alternative solvent is GreenEarth. This method is an environmentally safe dry cleaning process that replaces petroleum-based solvents with liquid silicone, a gentle solution made from one of the earth's safest and most abundant natural resources: silica, or sand. Dry cleaners love cleaning with GreenEarth because it is an effective green cleaning method that doesn't cost more than traditional dry cleaning system.

These three cleaning methods are significantly safer where human health and the environment are a concern.

To be sure your dry cleaner is using one of them, ask the shop owner to detail his or her cleaning methods. Also, The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offers a nationwide list of cleaners using wet and/or CO2 cleaning methods. It is available at www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/garment/bcrg/cleanguide.pdf.

5 Eco-friendly Alternatives to Traditional Dry Cleaning:

1. Find a progressive cleaner:

When searching for dry cleaners, search out a professional who offers non-perc dry cleaning. There are 3 popular alternatives right now: high tech wet washing, CO2, and silicone-based cleaners (also known as GreenEarth Cleaning).

2. Consider personal dry cleaning:

Home dry cleaning kits- such as Dryel and FreshCare – are not chemical free, but do not contain perc. They are simple step processes that can be a great alternative in areas without eco-friendly cleaners.

3. Opt for the washer:

Modern washers with gentle cycles are often suitable for items that require hand-washing. Consider investing in a front-loading washer. Front-load washers have increased water efficiency and the money saved on laundering delicates will make-up for the purchase price.

4. Steam away dirt and odors:

Sometimes a little is enough: Steam clean lightly soiled articles in your dryer. Place delicates in the dryer with a damp colorfast towel and run a normal cycle.

5. Re-evaluate your wardrobe:

The best way to reduce dry cleaning pollution is to stop buying clothes that require dry cleaning. Get into the habit of checking labels in the store, and learning of the cleaning care requirements before you purchase it.

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