



Upholstered Furniture Needs Special Care

By Rajiv Jain

Three factors determine how easy it will be to clean and maintain upholstery:

- * Does the fabric have a protective coating?
- * What type of fiber is it made of?
- * How was it dyed or colored?

But you can't always control these factors. Often the fabric is selected by someone who bought the furnishings without your input. So you must make sure proper maintenance and restoration methods are used to keep the upholstered furniture looking like new.

A protective film or coating improves fabric cleanability considerably. Recent advances in coating and lamination technology have led to a variety of coatings for application.

Dyes and the methods used for coloring fibers have a strong influence on cleaning methods. For example, fabrics produced with solution-dyed fibers can be cleaned with stronger chemicals and more aggressive cleaning methods than a regular cotton upholstery fabric. But a fabric colored with a dye that has poor wet-fastness may not be cleaned with water-based methods since they may cause the color to run.

Fiber type also is important in fabric cleaning. When wet-cleaning wool, the cleaning solution pH should be in the range of 5.0 to 8.5. Use a low pH cleaning agent when wet-cleaning cotton fabric. If you use a chemical with a pH higher than 8.5, follow it with an acid rinse. Fifth generation stain-resistant nylon should be cleaned using an agent with pH less than 10.0.

Consistent Care

Routine, day-to-day upholstery maintenance includes:

- * Thorough vacuuming of upholstered furniture using the appropriate machine attachment to remove dust and lint
- * Turning and rotating movable cushions to help equalize soiling and wear

* Paying extra attention to protective arm covers and headrests. These items get more wear and tear than other upholstered furniture parts.

* Extra vacuuming to minimize the difference in appearance between worn areas.

Proper routine care preserves upholstery's appearance and means less frequent "restorative" cleaning.

To clean commercial upholstery fabrics, obtain and follow the cleaning and maintenance instructions provided by the manufacturer or supplier. If those instructions aren't available, refer to the fabric's cleaning codes.

Always test-clean an inconspicuous area of fabric first. Once dried, carefully inspect the test spot for discoloration or other undesired changes in fabric appearance. If there is an adverse reaction, test-clean another inconspicuous area with a different cleaning agent or cleaning method.

Do not remove zippered cushion covers for cleaning; if excessive shrinkage occurs, backing compounds may be damaged.

In case of a spill, promptly remove the staining matter from the fabric surface. Delays or faulty attempts at spot removal can result in indelible stains or other permanent damage to the fabric. Untreated spills and spots eventually hidden by soil will reappear during restorative cleaning.

Solid or semi-solid spills from ice cream or candle wax should be scraped carefully or broken up with a spoon or spatula, then vacuumed. Remove as much of the material as possible before actually lifting the spot.

Coffee and other water-based stains can be removed using water-based cleaning agents -- try a solution of 1 teaspoon of a mild detergent in 1 cup of warm water. Odorless mineral spirits may remove oil-based stains such as grease. Always test stain-removal agents in an inconspicuous area of the fabric first.

If the tests don't cause color run, shrinkage or other problems, apply a small amount of stain-removal agent on a damp towel and work it from the stain's outside edge to its center. Be careful -- too much stain-removal agent may cause overwetting or stain spread.

Blot the stain-removal agent and the stain using a fresh towel, but don't rub; rubbing can smear the stain.

Once the stain is removed, lift the residual cleaning agent from the fabric by blotting and rinsing, or drying for solvent-based cleaners.

Close Encounters

You'll likely encounter only a few major upholstery fabric types in most commercial environments.

Solution-dyed fabrics have a facing made up of 100 percent solution-dyed fibers, which have coloring material essentially locked into the fiber structure during extrusion (the process in which synthetic fibers are manufactured). Solution-dyed fabrics can usually be cleaned with a water- or solvent-based cleaner. They may also be spot-cleaned with diluted bleach, unless otherwise specified.

Clear protective-coated fabrics are commonly used in healthcare and hospitality facilities, restaurants and other places requiring high-performance fabrics. Their face has a clear, protective coating which resists stains and soiling. Most of these fabrics can be cleaned with water-based methods.

Coated yarn fabrics are those in which yarn is first coated with a protective resin, then woven into the fabric. Such fabrics are used in stadium, auditorium and healthcare furniture. Most of these fabrics can be cleaned using water-based methods.

Regular vinyl or polyurethane fabrics, used in many commercial applications, can be cleaned using water-based methods. These fabrics should not be cleaned with solvents because solvents can damage the material.

High-performance vinyl is more durable, stain-resistant, anti-microbial and bleach-cleanable than regular vinyl. Like regular vinyl, high-performance vinyl may be cleaned using water, but not solvents.

Rajiv Jain is manager of technical services for the Association of Specialists in Cleaning and Restoration International (ASCRI), in Annapolis Junction, MD.