

Healthier Dry Cleaning

Non-Toxic Ways to Lower Risks



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Chemicals used in dry cleaning clothes have long been linked to health concerns for both people and the environment. Perchloroethylene (“perc” for short) is most commonly used in this process. Federal regulatory agencies have documented myriad negative effects from exposure to the petroleum-based solvent.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration links it to dizziness, blurred vision, loss of coordination and other nervous system effects, including memory loss. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency calls perc a likely human carcinogen “by all routes of exposure.” The EPA also warns that the chemical can leak into the ground, contaminating water supplies, and react in the air to form smog, which has been associated with respiratory effects.

Earthtalk.org suggests there are safer alternatives through products and processes used by independent “green” dry cleaners nationwide. These include a biodegradable liquid silicone—essentially liquefied sand—which doesn’t chemically react with fabric fibers. It’s safe to use on delicate garments like beads, lace, silk and cashmere, and won’t cause

shrinkage. *GreenEarthCleaning.com* includes a store locator function.

Another good option is wet cleaning, whereby fabric is laundered in a computer-controlled washer and dryer that uses water—along with specialized soaps and conditioners instead of solvents—and spins its contents much more slowly than a typical home washing machine.

Because wet cleaning is free of hazardous volatile organic compounds like those in perc, it eliminates health and safety risks, as well as environmental hazards associated with traditional dry cleaning, according to *GreenAmerica.org*. As an added benefit, the equipment and operating costs are lower. While the biggest disadvantage to wet cleaning is that it produces waste water, it’s still a highly energy-efficient method.

Another method is liquid carbon dioxide (CO₂) cleaning, in which some commercial cleaners use the pressurized gas in combination with other gentle cleaning agents to dissolve and remove dirt, fats and oils in clothing instead of using perc; or consider simply handwashing delicate clothes and fabrics in a mild, non-toxic detergent, and then hanging them outside to dry.