

# Providing Auto Carpet Care for Customer Health

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You don't have to be a car connoisseur to know that vehicles do not age very well. In fact, the minute customers drive off the lot and see the dealership sign in their new car's rearview mirror, the value of the vehicle drops almost immediately.

However, something auto detailers and their customers may not know is that the carpeting inside a brand new vehicle can become colonized with bacteria, allergens, fungi, and other contaminants almost just as quickly. These impurities can mar a vehicle's indoor air quality and result in a variety of health-related problems and issues, especially respiratory.

Vacuuming and spot cleaning the carpet, whether performed while the car is still on the showroom floor, in the new owner's garage, or at your detail shop, can temporarily put the brakes on bacterial growth. However, these colonies will soon rebound and can return even stronger with time and use of the car.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), soiled carpeting that is damp or allowed to remain wet can provide an ideal setting for the proliferation, growth and persistence of a range of contaminants. Although the CDC was addressing indoor carpeting in its assessment, this danger is applicable to the carpeting found in vehicles.

Contaminants found in autos can actually cause more severe health problems compared to contaminants found in a building. In small, confined spaces, such as a car with closed windows and heating and air conditioning systems that recirculate contaminated air, adverse health effects can be intensified.

According to Ellen L. Garibaldi, assistant professor of internal medicine at Saint Louis University School of Medicine, morning commuters "exposed to allergens in auto carpets can have an immediate reaction of itchy eyes, runny nose, and cough ... and this exposure produces a second wave of nasal obstruction, fatigue, and sinus problems later in the day."

## The 'Smoking Gun'

According to Garibaldi, respiratory and other problems intensify when tobacco smoke is in the car. There is now evidence that smoking a single cigarette for only five minutes in a vehicle can result in concentrations of respirable suspended particles (RSP) that reach levels similar to those measured in smoky bars, according to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Passengers riding in a car in which someone has recently smoked are exposed to secondhand smoke. Not only is this a health hazard for passengers and drivers alike, we now know that it can be fatal. It is estimated that as many as 54,000 people die each year as a result of secondhand smoke.

Although inhaling secondhand smoke can occur just about anywhere, riding inside an enclosed vehicle can be troubling and dangerous, especially for children. As a result, several communities, five states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico have all enacted laws to prevent smoking in cars.

For detailers, eradicating smoke odors is a common problem and customer request. Although there are systems that can remove the smoke odor, such as ozone-generating equipment, the source of the odor as well as other odor-causing contaminants and allergens must first be removed in order for these systems to be effective. And, as most detailers know, it can be a difficult problem because smoke can penetrate just about any surface in the car, from soft surfaces, like fabrics and upholstery, to hard surfaces, such as metals and wood.

This is true of many other airborne contaminants as well; however, it is in carpeting that the bulk of RSP, as well as many other allergens, bacteria, and contaminants, eventually cause the most concern.

## **Proper Carpet Cleaning Methods**

When car owners attempt to clean the carpets in their cars, they often will use spray-on detergents designed to clean auto carpets; rub the area vigorously by hand; wipe it dry with a cloth; and then allow it to air dry. Many auto detailers follow a fairly similar procedure and might use a fragrance or deodorizer as a finishing touch.

Although this system does remove some surface-level contaminants, it can be relatively ineffective at removing bacteria, smoke, allergens, fungi and other particulates that find their way deep into carpet fibers. Further, this cleaning method can actually harm the health of the detailer, as well as car owners and passengers.

For instance, in one case, an outbreak of aspergillus — a fungus that also grows in automobile carpets — contaminated the carpets in a facility. To alleviate the problem and clean the carpets, custodial workers used a cleaning method referred to as “bonnet cleaning.” With this system, a detergent was applied to a bonnet, which was attached to a floor machine that scrubbed the carpet.

The bonnet did collect some of the aspergillus spores, but many were dispersed into the air, harming the health of the user and building occupants. Except for the floor machine, bonnet cleaning is very similar to the manual carpet cleaning method car owners and many detailers use.

## **A Better Alternative**

A more effective method to remove aspergillus and most other contaminants, as well as more thoroughly clean auto carpets, is to use hot-water carpet extractors, commonly used by professional carpet cleaners. These machines penetrate deep into carpet fibers and can pull and remove soils and contaminants from the carpet's backing to the surface.

The most effective machines are low-moisture extractors which enable the carpet to dry faster. Look for instant heating systems that can heat the water/cleaning solution to more than 200 degrees Fahrenheit at the wand tip. Instant heat means the machine is ready to work as soon as the operator is. Also, heat improves the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals so that more soils and impurities are removed and less chemical is necessary, which helps protect the interior health of the car.

## Marketing the Message

Detailers should not hesitate to educate their customers on the importance of proper carpet care. In most situations, car owners turn to a detailer because they want to improve the appearance of their cars. However, interior car care, especially the removal of contaminants from carpets, can be as much (if not more) about health as it is appearance.

Detailers often will charge extra if an ozone machine is used to eradicate car odors. This adds to their profits and covers the cost of the equipment. Adding an extra charge for using a carpet extractor is not only profitable for the detailer, it also may actually be a cost savings for the car owner. Health benefits and preserving the carpet's appearance and longevity makes this a win-win situation for detailers and their clients.

*This article was submitted by the Professional Auto Care division at U.S. Products, manufacturers of professional carpet, floor and restoration cleaning equipment. For more information, visit [www.usproducts.com/carcare](http://www.usproducts.com/carcare).*

### **SIDEBAR**

## Adding the 'Knockout Punch'

Although using a low-moisture, hot-water extractor can effectively remove harmful contaminants from auto carpets, it does not necessarily mean any odors caused by the contaminants also are removed. The reason is simple. Although odors may be the result of bacteria, fungi, mold, mildew or other impurities growing in the carpets, once the odors have become airborne, they can permeate the car's fabric, leather and vinyl upholstery, as well as the dashboard and other interior areas.

The first step in odor eradication is to remove the source — in this case the allergens and contaminants in the carpet. After this has been accomplished, in order to permanently remove any remaining odors in the car it is typically necessary to use electronic deodorization. This refers to ozone systems or ozone kits that will remove any residual odors. Cleaning technicians and detailers often refer to using ozone as the “knockout punch” to eliminate odor problems.

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