



The Challenges of Carpet Cleaning

Mark Cuddy

Wall-to-Wall

Cleaning carpets presents some of the toughest obstacles for restaurants

Many restaurant owners install carpeting in their facilities because it can help quiet a busy area and add softness and elegance that is often lacking with hard-surface floors. Plus, it is easier to clean and maintain than other surfaces, according to some experts.

However, just as with all floor surfaces, carpeting does present some specific challenges. The two that are generally the most bothersome, especially in a restaurant dining room, are recurring spots and pathway soiling.

The Mystery of Recurring Spots

When it comes to carpeting, spots and stains are not the same thing. A spot on a carpet is typically caused by a substance that has been dropped or spilled but has not bonded with or caused permanent damage to, the carpet fibers. Spots can typically be removed using proper cleaning and spotting techniques. A stain, on the other hand, refers to a substance that has bonded to the carpet fibers, usually causing permanent damage.

Restaurant owners and managers can usually determine whether something is a spot or a stain simply by touching the problem area. Spots can be felt on carpeting because they rest on the surface of the carpet fiber. Stains, on the other hand, penetrate and often discolor carpet fibers, leaving the carpet feeling the same but looking altered or damaged.

Recurring spots can be especially frustrating for both restaurant owners and carpet cleaning technicians. When noticeable soiling appears on carpeting—usually in open or conspicuous areas—the restaurant owner or manager will have the carpet cleaned to remove the spots. After cleaning, all is well for a few days or perhaps even a week or more, but then the spots reappear.

This is caused by wicking. Wicking is the upward motion of water and cleaning solution during the drying process. Water, cleaning solution and soils that remain at the base of the carpeting after cleaning drift up to the top, where they are deposited on the tips of the carpet fibers, appearing as a noticeable spot.

Other reasons for recurring spots, and their possible solutions, include:

Only the surface of the carpet was cleaned. While some “quickclean” or interim carpet cleaning methods can adequately remove surface-level soiling, soil that is more deeply embedded in carpet fibers requires more extensive cleaning. Hot-water carpet extraction is typically required to remove deeply embedded soiling.

Sometimes carpet spot cleaners or detergents are not adequately rinsed away after cleaning. The residue left behind does not actually dry but remains sticky, acting as a magnet that attracts more soiling. As restaurant patrons and staff walk over the problem area, soils from shoes attach to these sticky spots. Even dust in the air can stick to this residue, and the resulting buildup causes a spot to reappear. To resolve this issue, clean the problem area using hot-water carpet extraction and then rinse thoroughly.

Restaurants often use tape on certain areas of the carpet (to cover a cord, for instance). Once the tape is removed, it leaves a sticky residue on the carpet, acting as a magnet for soils. If the area is cleaned but the residue has not been completely removed, spots can reappear. To rectify this, carpet cleaning technicians must remove this sticky residue completely as possible and then clean the carpet using hot-water extraction.

A more serious problem involves soil that has made its way down to the carpet backing and, making matters worse, may have spread. As one carpet-cleaning technician explained, a spot can “start out about the size of a silver dollar but end up the size of a Frisbee.” After the carpet is cleaned, the embedded soil wicks back up to the surface. In such cases, the carpet, including the padding underneath, may need to be replaced. However, a technician may be able to use various rinsing agents and anti-soiling treatments, followed by thorough rinsing, to eliminate the spot.

Some carpet-cleaning technicians have had success removing recurring spots using encapsulation carpet cleaning. With this method, the technician applies and works encapsulating chemical detergents into the carpet fibers to loosen and dissolve soils, and then vacuums the area. With each vacuuming, more of the detergents and soils are removed.

In general, to help prevent spots from reappearing, restaurant owners or managers and carpet-cleaning technicians should ensure carpets are thoroughly rinsed and dried in the quickest possible time after cleaning. Air movers should be placed at strategic spots around the cleaned area to speed drying. Additionally, using low-moisture extractors can help reduce drying times. Low-moisture carpet cleaning uses less water, and powerful vacuums effectively remove the moisture. Both of these strategies ensure carpets are thoroughly dried after cleaning, which can help prevent spots from reappearing or wicking back up to the surface.

Unobvious Pathway Soiling

Pathway soiling, also known as traffic lane soiling, is another common problem in restaurants. Pathway soiling develops in major walkways, such as in dining rooms or hallways, and generally appears as dark areas on the carpet. Surrounding areas may look clean; in fact, it is common in hallway areas for the edge of the carpet to look virtually brand new, while the center walkway area is dark, matted down and unobvious.

Pathway soiling occurs because carpets act as sponges, collecting soils, allergens and contaminants. This keeps pollutants from becoming airborne and spreading to other parts of the restaurant. This actually helps protect indoor air quality.

But over time, in areas where there is excessive foot traffic, soils build up. When this happens, the pollutants contained in the carpeting can adhere to people’s shoes, often causing soils to be tracked from one part of the facility to another.

One of the best ways to deal with pathway soiling and soil transfer is to prevent it in the first place. A high-performance matting system is the best defense when it comes to minimizing pathway soiling. These mats are specially designed to trap and hold soils and moisture, preventing them from attaching to shoes and spreading to other floor surfaces. As much as 15 feet of matting may be required, both outside and inside the facility. This will trap and hold more than 70 percent of the soil and moisture tracked in on shoes, keeping debris and liquids off carpeting.

If pathway soiling does occur, hot-water carpet extraction will be necessary to remove it. Portable extractors are often effective in restaurant settings because they are more flexible in smaller spaces; what’s more, if the restaurant is several floors above street level, portable systems are the only option for carpet extraction.

It is important to note that not all carpet extractors are hotwater extractors. Some systems do not heat the cleaning solution; instead, they apply cold water to the carpets. But studies indicate that heating the cleaning solution to approximately 212 degrees Fahrenheit at the wand tip improves the effectiveness of cleaning chemicals. In addition to improved cleaning using hot water also makes the cleaning process less labor intensive and less costly, especially in highly soiled areas such as pathways.

A machine that delivers a high level of pressure (measured in pounds per square inch) is also preferable. This added pressure helps the machine reach more deeply into carpet fibers to remove soils and contaminants.

Why Maintenance Matters

Restaurant owners and managers can prevent spotting, staining and pathway soiling by having an effective carpet cleaning and maintenance program in place. All too often, carpets are cleaned only when they appear soiled. Most technicians agree that waiting until that time may actually be too late, since by that point spots are often deeply embedded in fibers and harder to remove.

While no carpet cleaning and maintenance system will work for all restaurants, many restaurant owners and managers find that having carpets cleaned with a hot-water extractor at least once a month or every few months keeps their carpets clean. A little trial and error may be necessary when it comes to determining carpet-cleaning frequencies. Having carpets

cleaned regularly and frequently is one of the best ways to keep recurring spots and pathway soiling from becoming a problem.

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Quick Thoughts on Carpet Care

Vacuuming

Many restaurant owners ask how frequently carpets should be vacuumed and want to know the best vacuum cleaner options. In carpeted dining rooms, carpets should be vacuumed at least once per day at the end of the day or, if possible, between shifts (for instance, after lunch and then again after dinner). Vacuuming removes dry soil that has become lodged in carpet piles. The faster and more frequently dry soil is removed, the cleaner and healthier the carpets remain, the longer they will last and the more it will help delay carpet-cleaning cycles.

As to the type of vacuum cleaner to use, an upright with a "beater bar" is preferable. The beater bar's main function is to help loosen dry soils so they can be more easily vacuumed up. When combined with ample suction, this is the most effective way to vacuum carpeted dining rooms.

Carpet Extraction Frequencies

Most restaurant owners find that deep-cleaning their carpets at least once per month is the most effective way to keep their carpets clean. However, instead of setting carpet cleaning on a calendar schedule, some wonder if it should be based on foot traffic. For instance, should carpets be cleaned after 15,000 guests? 20,000 guests?

To answer this question, we asked well-known carpet-cleaning expert Fred Geyen of the Geyen Group. The following is his response:

"I have never heard anyone take that approach before; I give it an "A" for creativity and common sense, but I have never seen it. We have an office in Tampa and have done a lot of work for Darden Restaurants, whose brands include Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse, Bahama Breeze, The Capital Grille, etc., and have never been asked to consider foot traffic as an issue. Typically, they set up a regular carpet-cleaning schedule, such as once per month, and adjust it based on cleaning needs. I do like the concept, but I'm not sure it is very practical."