

COLORFASTNESS CODES

WHAT IS A COLORFASTNESS CODE?

In order to care for interior fabrics, it is often helpful to know what cleaning methods are suitable for a given material. The furniture and textile industries, under the auspices of the Joint Industry Fabric Standards and Guidelines Committee of the American Furniture Manufacturer's Association, publish voluntary standards and guidelines for a wide variety of fabric characteristics, including colorfastness.

Many upholstered furnishings carry a label containing a "colorfastness code" which gives a brief description of the appropriate cleaning instructions.

There are four different codes used in this system:

W – Spot clean only with water-based shampoo or foam upholstery cleaner.

S – Spot clean only with a water-free dry cleaning solvent. **DO NOT USE WATER.**

WS – Spot clean with upholstery shampoo, foam from a mild detergent, or a mild dry cleaning solvent.

X – Clean only by vacuuming or light brushing with a non-metallic, stiff bristle brush. **DO NOT USE ANY WATER OR SOLVENT BASED CLEANER.**

These codes are also usually found on the sample tags of fabrics intended for upholstery.



Rayon Chenille (woven into a polyester warp). This fabric is an "S" code. It is colorfast to water however it is prone to significant pile distortion when exposed to water-based liquids.

NOT "CLEANABILITY CODES"

It is important to understand that these codes are not, as many believe, cleanability codes; a "W" code does not mean that hot water extraction is necessarily safe for the fabric. In fact, the committee that created the codes has this to say:

"The colorfastness code refers to the ability of the yarns in a particular fabric to remain colorfast to either water, solvent, or both and does not reflect the ability of that fabric to withstand specific cleaning methods."

These codes are derived in various ways. Some manufacturers actually test fabrics and apply the appropriate code. If this were routine, the majority of fabrics we see would not be labeled "S" (use dry-cleaning solvents only). We have found that some

fabric manufacturers and distributors routinely label *all* of their fabrics “S.” We can only guess that the motivation has to do with avoiding liability for problems due to improper wet cleaning. Indeed, most upholstery fabrics are wet cleanable with no special concerns. You will find that most fabrics with “S” codes are perfectly safe to clean with water-based methods, as long as testing and careful procedures are followed.

WHEN “S” MEANS “S”

There are a handful of fabrics that are all but guaranteed to be damaged when exposed to water-based cleaners. When these fabrics are encountered, they will almost always be “dry clean only.” Fabrics in this category include:

- *Velvet/chenille*
Rayon (See front page)
Silk
- *Embossed fabrics*
- *Natural Linen*
- *Moiré*
Silk
Cotton
Linen
Rayon

Note: This list is not exhaustive. It includes some of the more common “problem fabrics.” Pre-testing is always required before using chemicals of any kind on fabric. A very small number of these fabrics, especially in the embossed category, may even turn out to be damaged by dry cleaning solvents. These would be classified and handled as “X” code fabrics.

TEST! TEST! TEST!

The fact is that colorfastness codes are not always reliable. Pre-testing cleaning agents on an inconspicuous area of the fabric

(such as the zipper side of an upholstered cushion) is the only way to avoid unpleasant surprises such as bleeding dyes, nap distortion, yellowing, etc.

Worth mentioning again: Though dry cleaning solvents rarely cause damage on upholstery fabrics, it is important to test these products, too. (We have seen one instance in which a polished finish was completely stripped from a fabric after exposure to a mild dry cleaning solvent.)

GET IT DRY

One of the biggest reasons for problems in the cleaning of interior fabrics is inadequate attention to drying. There is absolutely nothing good that can happen when a fabric is left damp for an hour or more while it dries with no air movement. There are, however, many bad things that can happen.

As a general rule, freshly cleaned fabrics should be force-dried with the use of air movers or other types of fans.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

The Joint Industry Fabric Standards and Guidelines Committee has accepted IICRC S300 Upholstery Cleaning Standard. There is every likelihood that the colorfastness codes will be abandoned in the near future.

AS WITH ALL FABRICS AND FINISHES, ALWAYS TEST CHEMICALS AND/OR PROCEDURES FIRST IN AN INCONSPICUOUS AREA OF THE FABRIC.