

Take the stress out of cleaning

Time and hard work can take its toll on technicians. Protect yourself with ergonomically designed equipment and tools.

By Jeff Simpson



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It is not unusual for people in their late teens and early 20s to think they are invincible.

They think they can hike any mountain, swim any stream, or perform the craziest of stunts with little concern or likelihood of being injured.

Very often, they continue in this frame of mind until something unfortunate does happen and they learn they are no longer as indestructible and injury-free as they once believed.

In the professional cleaning industry, carpet cleaning technicians tend to have this same mindset.

Many believe that no job is too hard, too big, or too difficult to take on.

And, in most cases, they want to work as hard and as fast as possible while still providing quality work for their customers.

Typical industry practice is to charge by the square foot or by the job, not by the hour, so the faster a project is completed, the sooner the technicians can move on to another job and make more money.

Possible damage

All of this hard and fast work, however, takes a toll on the body; just like young people, carpet cleaners soon learn they are not invincible.

By their early to mid-30s, many start to notice the stress and strain they have subjected their bodies to on the job over the years.

This is usually the point where they leave the business, delegate more of the strenuous carpet cleaning work to others, or devote their time to the sales and management aspect of their companies.

The carpet cleaner workout

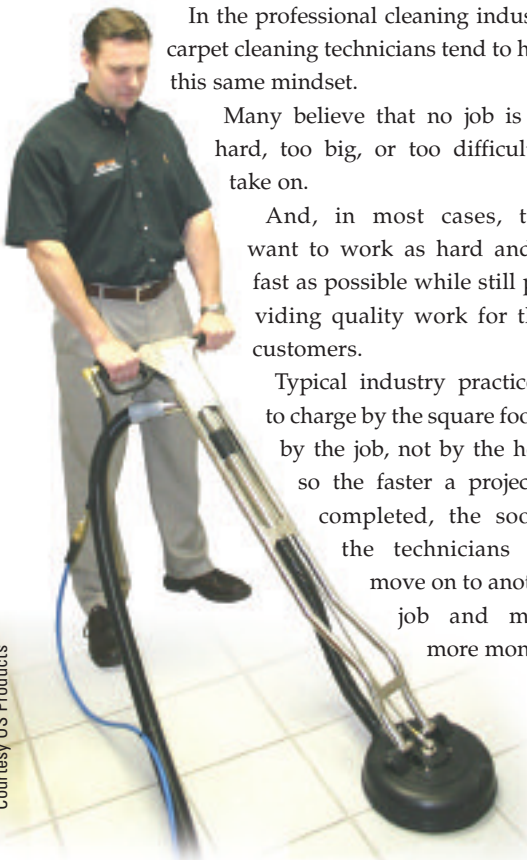
As every carpet cleaning technician knows, carpet cleaning is demanding and very labor intensive.

Studies show that carpet cleaning can be compared to cardiovascular exercise.

However, in many situations, cleaning carpet actually uses more muscle groups and is more demanding than typical cardiovascular exercises one might do in a gym.

In the process of cleaning carpet, technicians may be required to:

- Lift, move, transport, and maneuver portable extractors, electric powered cleaning tools, and other pieces of equipment that can weigh anywhere from 50 to 200 pounds.
- If using portable equipment, carry buckets of water and pour out buckets of soiled cleaning solution.
- Pull or carry vacuum and solution hoses — sometimes hundreds of feet if using a truckmount — into the home or business.
- Walk the equivalent of several miles each day.
- Lift, move, and replace furniture.
- And, possibly the most strenuous of all, push and pull carpet extraction tools.



Courtesy US Products

Stand erect when using attachments. This places less strain on the back and allows you to have better control of tools.

KEYWORD ergonomics

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The pain

Often, the end result of all this dexterous, ongoing, strenuous work during long periods of time is work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs).

These most often affect the upper limbs, back, and lower limbs, especially the knees and hips, and the pain can range from minor irritation and discomfort to debilitating pain, soreness, and even numbness, especially over time.

At one time, it was believed the best way to avoid these injuries was through education and training programs.

It was thought that if cleaning workers were taught stress-minimizing ways to perform their tasks, WMSDs and their severity could be minimized, if not eliminated.

However, this approach has not proven successful for one reason: Many carpet cleaning technicians are simply *not* taught healthier, less stressful ways to perform their work.

But, even when training programs have been actively conducted and promoted, the results have been disappointing.

According to a study by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the United Kingdom's department in charge of health and safety regulations and enforcement in the workplace, "The effectiveness of these training programs to reduce the incidence of musculoskeletal disorders has not been clearly demonstrated. It is generally considered that the provision of information and training alone is unlikely to be effective in reducing risk and that there should be an overall ergonomic approach to solving the problem."

The ergonomic approach

The word *ergonomics* has become a buzzword among professional carpet cleaners.

Ergonomics is a science in which one aspect of it includes designing equipment that better fits the worker.

For carpet cleaning technicians, an ergonomically designed machine requires less physical stress, has minimal impact on joints, muscles, nerves, tendons and bones, and is overall easier to use. Additionally, less worker stress usually results in improved worker productivity.

While talk abounds about new, ergonomically designed carpet cleaning equipment, many carpet cleaning technicians question how much of this is just marketing hype and how much refers to genuinely reengineered machines.

Fortunately, we *are* seeing some truly ergonomically designed equipment, and more is expected in the future.

There have been significant changes to carpet cleaning wands in the past few years, making them easier to use.

Wand grips are more comfortable to use and more ergonomically designed. Some stainless steel wands have a more rounded shape, reducing the force necessary to move the wand over the carpet.

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Additionally, some new wands utilize new technologies such as light-weight polyethylene construction in place of stainless steel, as well as technologies that help the wand better glide over carpet to reduce strain on the carpet cleaning technician.

Many of these wands are also lightweight, have low friction when gliding over carpet, are wear resistant, and capable of operating at very high temperatures.

Further, some new wands incorporate smoother laminar airflow. Reducing the turbulence of the airflow within the wand makes it more effective, which can reduce the number of passes required to clean carpet.

Fewer passes mean less physical effort by the operator.

Portables and ergonomics

While many carpet cleaners in our industry utilize truckmounts, it can't be ignored that those who use portables are at risk because of the need to physically move the

machines from trucks to the worksite.

This drives the need for better ergonomics for portable extractors, and such innovations can include:

- Easier-to-reach controls on the equipment that require no bending or stopping.
- Equipment made with lighter polyethylene molds to reduce total weight.
- Larger wheels to help maneuver the equipment into and out of elevators, as well as up and down stairs.
- Solution-fill areas that are strategically placed to reduce back stress.
- Hose management systems that make accessing and storing hoses easier.
- Dual-surface machines that can clean both carpet and hard surface flooring.

At least one manufacturer has begun designing portable extractors that stand upright, instead of the more conventional horizontal machines.

These machines are designed for one-person operation with large rear wheels and wheel handles, making them less difficult to remove from vans or trucks as well as move and maneuver at the job location.

The green connection

Carpet cleaning technicians will find that *ergonomics* is no longer a buzzword, but a reality in the industry.

And, one reason for this is the impact green cleaning has on the industry. Green cleaning's objective is to protect the environment and the health of home and building occupants, including cleaning technicians.

The green cleaning movement has gained dramatic momentum in recent years, and more manufacturers are answering the call.

More research and engineering is going into making all types of cleaning equipment, including portable carpet extractors and related carpet cleaning tools, more ergonomic.

Ergonomically-designed equipment and tools are safer and less physically stressful to operate, thus reducing worker fatigue, pain and injury.

A machine that helps protect the health of cleaning workers is an integral part of any green cleaning program. *CM*