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Regular vacuuming and cleaning can extend the life of your furniture

By STACY DOWNS, *The Kansas City Star*

When you vacuum the floor once a week, remember to vacuum the sofa. And the chairs. And the ottoman.

Sure, vacuuming is a chore, but it can help your furniture look better and last longer by sucking out the dirt and other gross stuff that break down the fibers.

Start by lifting cushions off sofas and chairs. Use a small handheld vacuum or the brush and crevice tools of a larger vacuum to clean under the seat cushions and the surrounding nooks that cover the frame. Then vacuum the cushions, suggests Martha Stewart's Homekeeping Handbook (Clarkson Potter, \$45).

The good news: Delicate furniture and pieces that aren't used often need to be vacuumed only monthly or every 90 days, says Troy Thorpe, owner of AmeriClean Services, based in Independence. The bad news: If Fluffy and/or Fido shed a lot, you should vacuum twice a week.

Fluff and rotate cushions after they are vacuumed to help keep fillings evenly distributed and to ensure even wear.

"Flipping the cushions can make your sofa look brand new again," says Laura Rowzee, who co-owns Rowzee Upholstery with her husband, Andy, in Kansas City, North.

A common misconception about upholstered furniture is that the zipper is for taking off the fabric and washing it. In fact, you should never machine-wash upholstery yourself. That could shrink the fabric and change the finish, making it different from the rest of the furniture piece.

"The zipper is meant for stuffing the cushion into the fabric to give it a tight fit," says Jan Jessup, spokeswoman for Calico Corners, a custom upholstery chain based in Kennett Square, Pa.

The company has a store in Overland Park. "All of the fabric on a furniture piece should be cared for the same to ensure the fabric remains uniform."

People who suffer allergies or asthma should cover fabric upholstery, which harbors dust mites, with machine-washable slipcovers or throws.

"Even professional cleaning can't kill the dust mites in the middle of the cushions in fabric upholstery," says Jeff Wald, a board-certified allergist at Kansas City Allergy & Asthma in Overland Park.

Wald recommends those coverings be washed at least once a week. The better option for people with allergies is leather furniture, which has its own set of care instructions (see box).

Fabric protection sprays aren't recommended because they negate the furniture warranty. Before blotting stains on fabric upholstery, check out furniture care labels. Here's what the letters mean:

** W: Use a water-based cleaner such as mild detergent.

** S: Spot-clean with a water-free solvent, which means professional cleaning only.

** WS: Water-based or water-free agents are fine.

** X: Clean only by vacuuming or light brushing.

The most common problem Thorpe sees on furniture is dirt on the arms, resulting from natural body oils.

"That's why those extra pieces of fabric on the arm rests can be a good idea," he says. "Those can be sent to the dry cleaner."

CARING FOR LEATHER

Leather furniture should be vacuumed or dusted weekly with a dry microfiber cloth. A commercial leather cleaner should be used every three to six months, depending on how much the piece is used.

Don't use soaps, sprays, oils or furniture polish on leather furniture. And don't place newspapers or magazines on it because ink can bleed onto the leather, causing permanent damage.

LOW-TECH STAIN REMOVAL KIT

Fabric upholstery: Blot spills immediately with a white cloth. Don't rub. On upholstery that is free of dust and can handle water, you can use a mixture of warm water and a few squirts of mild dishwashing detergent. If the stain remains, the gentle solution prevents it from setting. Then it's time to call a pro.

Leather upholstery: Blot spills immediately with a soft, dry, white cloth. To remove a stain, blot with a white cloth dampened with lukewarm water. Don't rub. For stubborn stains, such as ink, call a professional leather cleaner.

PROFESSIONAL CLEANING

** Most upholstery cleaning pros use alkaline-based chemicals to clean fabrics, the same type of chemicals used to wash skin and food.

** Everyday furniture should be cleaned yearly if you have kids and/or pets. Otherwise, it can be cleaned every five years.

** All-over routine cleaning typically starts at \$25 for an ottoman, \$60 for a standard sofa and more than \$100 for sectional sets. Spot-removal typically costs a minimum of \$75.