

Most clothes can be safely washed at home

Q. I just got back some dry cleaning that had a stronger than usual "dry cleaning" smell. What causes this odor? Do all clothes marked "dry clean only" need to be dry cleaned?

A. If you're like me, this sudden change from winter weather to summer heat has got you running to the storage closet to switch your winter/summer wardrobe.

As a result, you probably have a pile of winter items either just taken to the dry cleaners or ready to be dropped off for cleaning before they're packed away until next fall.

Clothes today are labeled "dry clean only" — whether they're made from natural or synthetic fabrics. That's an interesting label because "dry clean" isn't dry. Instead of detergent and water, clothes are cleaned with detergent and a liquid solvent designed to remove spots and stains.

This detergent/solvent mixture is not absorbed by the material. Because the material does not absorb the cleaning solution, the clothes don't stretch, shrink or fade. Dyes don't run; delicate fabrics don't tear; wools don't mat down.

consumer mailbag

The most widely used dry cleaning solvent is perchloroethylene, a non-renewable petrochemical distillate. The fumes from this chemical are what give your clothes the distinctive "dry cleaned" smell. "Perc," as it is known, is a toxic chemical. While it's very unlikely you'll suffer any health effects from wearing dry-cleaned clothes, these fumes have

been classified as a common indoor air pollutant by the U.S. EPA.

Frequent dry cleaning is unnecessary. Manufacturers in most cases just recommend dry cleaning to avoid complaints from customers when they ruin the garment through incorrect washing. Most clothes can be safely washed at home — if you know how.

To reduce dry cleaning, choose garments and fabrics that can be put into the washing machine or gently hand washed.

For items that can't avoid being dry cleaned, increase the time between cleanings by brushing and/or shaking out the garment after each wearing. Then let the clothes air out overnight. These steps will increase the life of the garment as well as reduce cleaning.

Protect yourself from exposure to "perc" fumes. If you can smell the perc, the clothes probably weren't

fully dried before being put into the protective plastic bag. You can either give them back and have them re-cleaned correctly, or you can take them home, remove them from the bag and hang the clothes in a well-ventilated area — preferably outdoors — to evaporate the solvent. Perc will evaporate completely.

The Consumer Mailbag answers your questions. Address mail to The Consumer Mailbag, Concern Detroit, One Kennedy Square, 4th Floor, Detroit, Mich. 48226.

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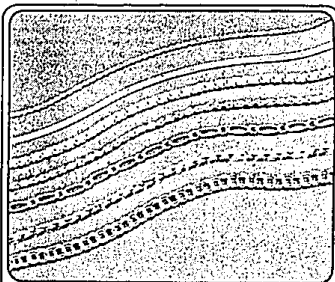
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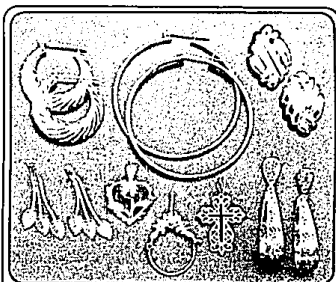
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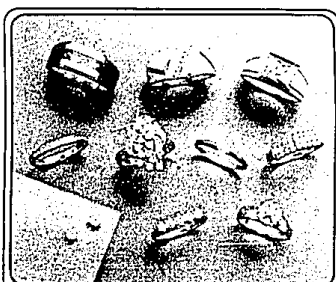
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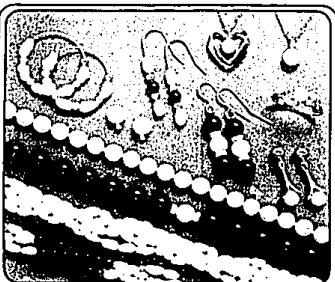
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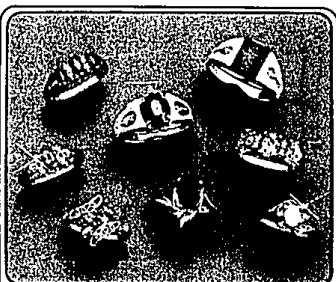
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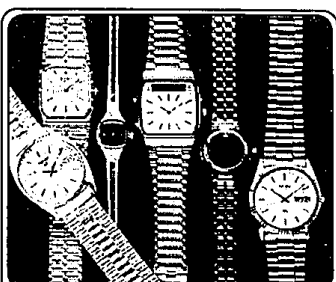
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