

## "Ask the Expert"

### *What Is "Green" Steam Cleaning?*

A concept that has garnered attention the past couple of years in the professional cleaning industry is chemical-free cleaning. This typically refers to the use of equipment and related products that effectively clean using just tap water without chemicals.

One of the best examples of this, and one growing in popularity, is the use of steam cleaners on surfaces and fixtures in locker rooms, restrooms, commercial kitchen areas, etc. Anyone who has experience cleaning these areas knows that traditionally they require powerful chemicals, many of which can have an adverse impact on the user, building occupants, and the environment.

Steam cleaners can eliminate these negative impacts. However, there are a lot of misunderstandings about using these systems, and we hope to clear up some of the confusion starting with the way they work.

These systems generate a "live steam" of steam. Using a wand and proper attachments, users apply the steam directly to the surface to be cleaned. There is minimal water content applied; the high temperature is most important.

Steam applied to a surface, for example tile and grout, acts as a disrupter, breaking the bond between the soil and the surface so that the soil can be easily and quickly wiped away.

It is similar to cleaning a greasy dish. Cold water may wash away some grease, but most will be left behind. Hot water will cause much of the grease to start breaking away from the dish even without cleaning agents. The big difference with steam cleaning systems is that the heat coming from the machine is far hotter than what comes out of the tap. A high-quality commercial steam cleaner can generate about 248 degrees (F). Hot tap water is typically around 130 degrees.

And as we said, there is only a small amount of water used in the steam cleaning process. This makes cleaning with steam relatively easy. With the proper equipment, there is not a lot of mess to clean up. Much of the steam evaporates quickly, and users often just wipe clean surfaces using a microfiber cloth.

But keep in mind that we are talking about commercial steam cleaning equipment, typically purchased through a janitorial distributorship or directly from a professional cleaning equipment manufacturer. Some commercial systems have refillable tanks, allowing continuous cleaning and improving worker productivity. The type of units sold by retailers in hardware or big-box stores may not provide enough heat, have refillable tanks, or be durable enough to perform the type of chemical-free cleaning we are discussing here.

Finally, some wonder if using a steam cleaner is difficult and if it is safe. The systems are easy to use, and because using a steam cleaner typically requires little scrubbing or agitation, cleaning professionals quickly appreciate them. As to safety, any machine, chemical, tool, or cleaning process can be dangerous if used improperly. This applies to Green steam cleaning as well, so the key is to be aware of manufacturers' directions, use commonsense, and follow safety precautions.

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