

The HSQUARED Free Carpet, Odor & Water Damage Field Guide

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Mission

This guide is for homeowners, renters, apartment managers, and maintenance teams who need practical help deciding what to do next with carpet, odor, moisture, stains, and small water losses.

It is not meant to scare people or sell unnecessary work. It is meant to help people avoid bad decisions, unnecessary replacement, unhealthy conditions, and wasted money.

1. First Rule: Stop Guessing and Identify the Source

Before cleaning, deodorizing, drying, or replacing anything, figure out what caused the problem.

Ask:

1. Is the issue water, urine, smoke, food, sewage, mold, humidity, or something else?
2. Is the source still active?
3. Is the carpet wet on top only, or wet through the backing and pad?
4. Is the odor in the carpet, pad, subfloor, walls, HVAC, cabinets, crawlspace, or contents?
5. Is this a one-time event or a long-term condition?

A lot of bad decisions happen because people treat the symptom instead of the source.

2. What to Do in the First 60 Minutes After Water Hits Carpet

Do this immediately:

1. Stop the water source.
2. Move furniture and contents away from wet areas.
3. Extract or shop-vac standing water.
4. Pull up small rugs.
5. Turn on HVAC if safe.
6. Use dehumidification if available.
7. Start air movement.
8. Take photos before moving major items.
9. Document the source of the water.
10. Call a qualified drying professional if water reached pad, walls, baseboards, closets, or multiple rooms.

EPA and CDC guidance both emphasize drying wet materials quickly, ideally within 24–48 hours when possible, to reduce mold risk.

3. What NOT to Do After Water Damage

Do not:

1. Wait several days “to see if it dries.”
2. Assume carpet is dry because the top feels dry.
3. Put fans on sewage or contaminated water.
4. Spray bleach on carpet.
5. Close up a wet room with no dehumidification.
6. Ignore closets, baseboards, tack strip, and pad.
7. Let furniture sit directly on damp carpet.
8. Forget to check the crawlspace or subfloor below.
9. Start demolition before documenting the condition.

10. Clean first when insurance testing or documentation is needed.

4. The 24–48 Hour Window

This is one of the most important consumer facts.

EPA guidance says mold generally will not grow if wet or damp items are dried within 24–48 hours, and EPA specifically recommends extraction, dehumidification, and fans for carpet and backing.

That does **not** mean everything is automatically ruined after 48 hours. It means the risk rises and the situation needs better inspection, moisture readings, and judgment.

5. Clean Water vs Dirty Water Matters

Not all water damage is the same.

Category 1 — Clean Water

Examples:

1. Supply line leak
2. Tub overflow with clean water
3. Refrigerator supply line
4. Water heater leak
5. AC condensate leak, depending on condition

Possible result:

1. Carpet and pad may be dryable if addressed quickly.
2. In-place drying may be possible.

Category 2 — Gray Water

Examples:

1. Dishwasher overflow
2. Washing machine discharge

3. Toilet overflow without feces
4. Water that has sat too long

Possible result:

1. More caution.
2. Padding may need removal.
3. Antimicrobial treatment may be needed.
4. Materials may or may not be salvageable.

Category 3 - Grossly Contaminated Water

Examples:

1. Sewage
2. Flood water
3. Groundwater intrusion
4. Toilet backflow with feces
5. Long-term contaminated water

Possible result:

1. Carpet and pad are typically removed.
2. Contaminated porous materials often need disposal.
3. PPE, containment, cleaning, and disinfection become much more important.

IICRC S500 is the professional water-damage restoration standard used for procedures and precautions in residential and commercial water losses.

6. Can Wet Carpet Be Dried in Place?

Sometimes yes.

In-place drying can be appropriate for Category 1 clean water losses when handled quickly by someone who knows what they are doing. A technical advisory on in-place drying notes that drying Category 1 losses in place can reduce the need for carpet disengagement, pad removal, replacement, and reinstall when performed by qualified contractors.

Good candidates:

1. Clean water source
2. Fast response

3. No sewage
4. No long-term saturation
5. Pad not degraded
6. Carpet not delaminating
7. Moisture can be verified with meters
8. Dehumidification and airflow are adequate

Bad candidates:

1. Sewage
2. Flood water
3. Unknown water source
4. Heavy contamination
5. Long-term moisture
6. Visible mold
7. Strong musty odor
8. Saturated walls or insulation
9. Carpet backing separating
10. Pad breaking down

7. Carpet May Feel Dry and Still Be Wet Underneath

The carpet face fiber can dry faster than:

1. Carpet backing
2. Pad
3. Tack strip
4. Subfloor
5. Baseboards
6. Drywall
7. Closet corners
8. Door jambs

This is why moisture readings matter.

A proper inspection may include:

1. Moisture meter
2. Thermal imaging
3. Hygrometer readings

4. Relative humidity
5. Temperature
6. Grain depression / drying conditions
7. Photos
8. Daily monitoring on larger losses

8. When Carpet Should Usually Be Replaced

Replacement may be the better decision when:

1. Sewage touched the carpet.
2. Flood water entered the home.
3. Carpet remained wet for an extended period.
4. Mold growth is visible.
5. Pad is contaminated or deteriorated.
6. Urine reached the subfloor repeatedly.
7. Carpet is delaminated.
8. Tack strip is rotted or contaminated.
9. Odor returns after proper treatment.
10. The carpet is old, worn, loose, or already failing.
11. The cost to restore approaches replacement cost.

9. When Carpet May Be Worth Saving

Carpet may be worth saving when:

1. Water source was clean.
2. Response was fast.
3. Carpet is in good physical condition.
4. Pad can be dried or replaced.
5. Odor is treatable.
6. Stains are cosmetic, not structural.
7. Subfloor is not contaminated.
8. Proper extraction and treatment are possible.

A lot of carpet gets replaced unnecessarily because people do not know restorative cleaning and drying options exist.

10. Padding Is Often the Deciding Factor

Carpet pad acts like a sponge.

Problems with pad:

1. Holds water
2. Holds urine
3. Holds odor
4. Dries slowly
5. Can contaminate carpet from underneath
6. Can hide problems

Sometimes pad can be dried. Sometimes it should be replaced. Sometimes partial pad replacement is enough.

A professional should not just clean the carpet face and ignore the pad if the problem clearly went through.

11. Pet Urine: Why Shampoo Usually Fails

Pet urine is not just a surface stain.

It can affect:

1. Carpet fiber
2. Carpet backing
3. Pad
4. Tack strip
5. Subfloor
6. Baseboards
7. Drywall
8. HVAC airflow paths

Common mistake:

Someone sprays deodorizer or runs a carpet machine over the top. It smells better for a day, then the odor returns.

Why?

Because moisture reactivates urine salts and odor compounds below the surface.

12. Pet Urine Treatment Levels

Light contamination

1. Surface spotting
2. Enzyme or urine treatment
3. Hot water extraction
4. Odor counteractant if appropriate

Moderate contamination

1. Subsurface flushing
2. Water Claw extraction
3. Enzyme dwell time
4. Oxidizing treatment if needed
5. Pad evaluation

Severe contamination

1. Pull carpet back
2. Remove pad
3. Treat subfloor
4. Seal subfloor if needed
5. Replace tack strip if contaminated
6. Clean or replace carpet depending on condition

Extreme contamination

1. Carpet replacement
 2. Pad replacement
 3. Subfloor treatment/sealing
 4. Baseboard removal may be needed
 5. Odor treatment of air/contents may be needed
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13. Blacklight Warning

Blacklights can help locate urine, but they are not perfect.

They may also show:

1. Cleaning residue
2. Laundry detergent
3. Old spills
4. Adhesives
5. Food/drink residue
6. Some fibers or optical brighteners

Use blacklight as a clue, not the final answer.

Odor, moisture, contamination pattern, and inspection matter.

14. Smoke Odor: Don't Just Fog It

Smoke odor can be in:

1. Walls
2. Ceilings
3. Cabinets
4. HVAC
5. Carpet
6. Pad
7. Upholstery
8. Blinds
9. Light fixtures
10. Closets
11. Attic or crawlspace air pathways

For severe smoke, cleaning matters before deodorizing.

Smoke odor often requires:

1. Source removal
2. HEPA vacuuming
3. Degreasing hard surfaces
4. Cleaning soft surfaces

5. HVAC evaluation
6. Odor oxidation treatment
7. Sealing surfaces in severe cases

Fogging alone may mask odor temporarily.

15. Nicotine and Tar Residue

Nicotine and tar are sticky.

Signs:

1. Yellow/brown residue on walls
2. Sticky cabinets
3. Brown drip marks near vents or bathrooms
4. Persistent stale smell
5. Odor stronger in humidity

Severe smoke jobs often require wall and hard-surface degreasing before ozone, chlorine dioxide, or other odor treatments work well.

16. Ozone: Useful but Not Magic

Ozone can help with certain odors, especially smoke and organic odors, but it must be used safely.

Important:

1. Ozone should not be used in occupied spaces.
2. People, pets, and plants should be out.
3. Treatment area should be aired out before reentry.
4. Source cleaning still matters.
5. Ozone can affect some materials if overused.

Ozone is a tool, not a substitute for cleaning.

17. Chlorine Dioxide Vapor: Useful for Odor, But Respect It

Chlorine dioxide can be very effective for odor treatment because it is an oxidizer.

Potential uses:

1. Smoke odor
2. Musty odor
3. Pet odor
4. Refrigerator odor
5. Some crawlspace odor concerns
6. Odor in vacant apartments or contained spaces

Important:

1. Use according to label and safety directions.
2. Avoid occupied exposure during treatment.
3. Ventilate after treatment.
4. Remove or protect sensitive materials if required.
5. Do not promise it solves structural mold problems by itself.

Chlorine dioxide can help with odor. Moisture control and source correction still matter.

18. Musty Smell Does Not Automatically Mean "Toxic Mold"

Musty odor means there may be moisture, microbial growth, or organic material breaking down.

Do not panic, but do not ignore it.

Check:

1. Crawlspace humidity
2. Plumbing leaks
3. HVAC condensation
4. Wet carpet or pad
5. Baseboards

6. Cabinets
7. Behind appliances
8. Around windows
9. Attic or roof leaks
10. Exterior drainage

EPA notes that moisture control is key to mold control, and mold growth is common where moisture and humidity remain elevated.

19. When to Test Air

Air testing can be useful when:

1. There are health concerns.
2. There is a dispute with insurance, landlord, tenant, or contractor.
3. You need documentation before remediation.
4. The source is unclear.
5. There is visible growth and you need scope.
6. A sensitive occupant is involved.
7. You need post-remediation verification.

Air testing is not always required, but once legal, insurance, or health concerns are involved, testing can protect everyone.

20. Do Not Clean Away Evidence Too Early

If insurance, landlord responsibility, construction defect, or legal issues may be involved:

Before major cleaning or demolition:

1. Take photos.
2. Save invoices.
3. Document dates.
4. Identify water source.
5. Get moisture readings.
6. Consider third-party testing.
7. Communicate in writing.

Cleaning too soon can sometimes make it harder to prove what happened.

21. Crawlspace Moisture Basics

Crawlspaces can create odors and indoor air concerns.

Look for:

1. Standing water
2. Wet insulation
3. High humidity
4. Bare soil
5. Condensation
6. Mold-like growth
7. Musty odor
8. Plumbing leaks
9. Poor drainage
10. Failed vapor barrier
11. Open vents causing humidity swings

Fixing crawlspace odor usually requires moisture control, not just deodorizer.

Possible steps:

1. Stop water intrusion
2. Improve drainage
3. Install or repair vapor barrier
4. Remove wet insulation if needed
5. Dry the space
6. Clean affected surfaces
7. Treat odor after moisture is controlled
8. Consider dehumidification or encapsulation if recurring

22. Apartment Turn Carpet: Clean vs Replace

Before replacing apartment carpet, check:

1. Is carpet structurally damaged?
2. Is there urine in the pad?
3. Is odor only in one room?

4. Can affected pad be replaced?
5. Is subfloor sealed?
6. Are stains permanent or correctable?
7. Is carpet loose and needs stretching?
8. Is the carpet worth saving based on age?

Many apartments replace carpet too quickly. Others try to save carpet that should be replaced. The right answer depends on inspection.

23. Move-Out Charge Fairness

For renters and property managers, separate:

Normal wear:

1. Traffic lane dulling
2. Minor soiling
3. Furniture marks
4. Light spots
5. Flattening in walk paths

Damage:

1. Pet urine contamination
2. Burns
3. Bleach spots
4. Paint spills
5. Severe odor
6. Delamination
7. Tears
8. Red dye stains
9. Heavy grease
10. Filtration soil from neglect
11. Water damage not reported

Documentation protects both sides.

24. Common Stains and What They Usually Need

Coffee

May need tannin treatment or specialty reducer.

Red dye / sports drinks

Often needs heat transfer or dye treatment.

Ink

Needs solvent-based spotting, patience, and careful rinsing.

Grease

Needs solvent or alkaline spotter.

Gum

Needs gel solvent or freezing method.

Turmeric

Very difficult. Often needs specialty chemistry and may not fully release.

Bleach

Not a stain. It is color loss. Cleaning will not fix it.

Rust

Needs acidic rust remover, not general cleaner.

Paint

Depends on water-based vs oil-based and how long it has cured.

25. Stain Rule: Don't Make It Worse

Do not:

1. Scrub aggressively.
2. Use bleach.
3. Mix random chemicals.
4. Use laundry detergent.
5. Over-wet the spot.
6. Use high heat on protein stains.
7. Pour vinegar and baking soda on everything.

8. Use dish soap heavily.
9. Rub from outside inward incorrectly.

Do:

1. Blot.
2. Test first.
3. Work outside toward center.
4. Use the right chemistry.
5. Rinse residue.
6. Dry the area.

26. Why Spots Come Back

Spots can return because of:

1. Wicking from backing or pad
2. Soap residue
3. Re-soiling from sticky residue
4. Incomplete extraction
5. Deep contamination
6. pH imbalance
7. Over-wetting
8. Old spills resurfacing during drying

A good cleaner should explain whether it is a stain, spot, wick-back, odor source, or permanent discoloration.

27. Carpet Cleaning Methods Explained

Hot Water Extraction

Best for deep soil removal, restorative cleaning, urine flushing, and heavily soiled carpet.

Encapsulation / VLM

Good for maintenance cleaning, commercial carpet, faster drying, and lower-moisture situations.

CRB Agitation

Excellent for lifting pile, breaking soil loose, working prespray, and improving results.

Bonnet Cleaning

Can improve appearance but may not remove deep soil unless used correctly.

Dry Compound

Useful in certain low-moisture settings but not ideal for all contamination.

Best method depends on the problem.

28. What a Good Carpet Cleaning Process Looks Like

A strong professional process may include:

1. Inspection
2. Pre-vacuum if needed
3. Spot identification
4. Furniture protection
5. Prespray
6. Agitation with CRB or groomer
7. Dwell time
8. Hot water extraction
9. Rinse
10. Spot treatment
11. Grooming
12. Speed drying
13. Final walkthrough
14. Recommendations if stains or odor remain

29. Questions to Ask a Carpet Cleaner

Ask:

1. What process are you using?
2. Do you agitate the carpet?
3. What do you use for pet urine?
4. Do you treat the pad if needed?
5. Do you rinse the carpet?
6. How long should it take to dry?
7. What happens if stains wick back?
8. Are you insured?
9. Do you handle odor or only cleaning?
10. Do you take photos for documentation?

30. Red Flags When Hiring Someone

Be careful if they:

1. Promise every stain will come out.
2. Say all odor can be fixed with perfume.
3. Do not inspect.
4. Do not ask what caused the issue.
5. Use the same process for every job.
6. Leave carpet soaked.
7. Cannot explain dry time.
8. Ignore pad/subfloor.
9. Dismiss moisture concerns.
10. Push replacement without inspection.
11. Push cleaning when replacement is clearly needed.

31. Healthy Dry Time Expectations

Most properly cleaned carpet should dry within several hours, depending on:

1. Humidity

2. Airflow
3. Carpet type
4. Soil level
5. Amount of water used
6. Extraction quality
7. HVAC use
8. Pad condition

If carpet is still very wet the next day, something may be wrong.

32. Furniture Protection

Wet carpet plus furniture can cause:

1. Wood stain transfer
2. Rust marks
3. Furniture swelling
4. Mold risk under legs
5. Permanent carpet marks

Use blocks, tabs, or remove furniture from wet areas.

33. Dehumidifiers Matter More Than People Think

Fans move moisture. Dehumidifiers remove moisture.

Fans without dehumidification can just move humid air around. In some situations, especially closed buildings, dehumidifiers are critical.

For water damage, you need:

1. Extraction
 2. Air movement
 3. Dehumidification
 4. Temperature control
 5. Monitoring
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34. Air Movers: Helpful but Can Be Misused

Air movers are useful when the water source is clean and the area is being dried properly.

Do not blast air across:

1. Sewage
2. Moldy materials
3. Contaminated dust
4. Unknown contamination

That can spread contaminants.

35. Air Scrubbers

Air scrubbers can help when:

1. There is demolition
2. Dust is present
3. Mold remediation is happening
4. Odor particles are airborne
5. Sensitive occupants are involved
6. Category 3 cleanup is underway

They are not a substitute for removing wet or contaminated materials.

36. Insurance Claim Tips

Document everything:

1. Date/time discovered
2. Photos/videos
3. Source of water
4. Rooms affected
5. Moisture readings
6. Equipment used
7. Daily drying logs
8. Communications
9. Invoices
10. Testing reports

Do not assume:

1. Homeowners covers everything.
2. Flood insurance is always required.
3. The first adjuster decision is final.
4. Replacement is always approved.
5. Drying is always denied.

Coverage depends on policy language, source of water, timing, and documentation.

37. Homeowners vs Flood: Basic Consumer Understanding

In general terms:

1. Sudden accidental water from inside plumbing may fall under homeowners coverage.
2. Rising groundwater, storm surge, or surface flooding usually requires flood coverage.
3. Long-term seepage or maintenance issues may be denied.

But policy language matters. Always verify with the carrier or a licensed insurance professional.

38. Landlord / Tenant Water Damage Advice

For tenants:

1. Report immediately in writing.
2. Take photos.
3. Move belongings.
4. Do not block access for mitigation.
5. Save receipts if displaced.
6. Ask what drying plan is being used.

For landlords/property managers:

1. Respond quickly.
2. Document source.
3. Use moisture readings.
4. Communicate plan.

5. Avoid dismissing health concerns.
6. Consider third-party testing when disputed.

39. Odor Diagnosis Checklist

Ask:

1. Is the odor constant or only when humid?
2. Stronger near floor, walls, HVAC, cabinets, or crawlspace?
3. Is there a known pet history?
4. Was there smoking?
5. Was there water damage?
6. Does odor return after cleaning?
7. Is the unit vacant or occupied?
8. Are soft contents present?
9. Is HVAC spreading it?
10. Is the odor chemical, musty, sour, ammonia, smoke, sewage, or dead-animal-like?

Odor work is detective work.

40. Common Odor Types

Urine / ammonia

Usually pet contamination, pad, subfloor, or baseboards.

Musty / earthy

Moisture, mold-like growth, crawlspace, HVAC, or wet materials.

Sour

Bacteria, wet carpet, dirty water, food spill, or old extraction residue.

Smoke

Walls, ceilings, HVAC, carpet, pad, contents.

Chemical

Cleaning residue, solvents, paint, off-gassing, pesticides.

Rotten / dead odor

Animal, drain issue, sewer gas, spoiled food, refrigerator, crawlspace.

41. Refrigerator Odor Guide

Refrigerators can often be saved.

Steps:

1. Remove all food.
2. Clean all shelves, drawers, gaskets, and seams.
3. Pull drawers and clean hidden channels.
4. Clean drip pan if accessible.
5. Treat with odor process.
6. Leave open to dry.
7. Use deodorizing treatment if needed.

Severe spoiled meat odor may require oxidation treatment, but cleaning comes first.

42. Mold Cleanup: When DIY May Be Reasonable

EPA says if the moldy area is less than about 10 square feet, many homeowners can often handle cleanup themselves, assuming there are no major health concerns or special circumstances.

DIY may be reasonable for:

1. Small surface area
2. Non-porous materials
3. Source fixed
4. No HVAC contamination
5. No sensitive occupants
6. No sewage/flood contamination

Call a professional when:

1. Area is larger

2. HVAC is involved
3. People are sick or highly sensitive
4. Water source was sewage/flood
5. Growth is hidden
6. It keeps returning
7. Insurance/legal documentation is needed

43. Flood Water Is Different

Flood water is not the same as a clean plumbing leak.

CDC and North Carolina DHHS flood cleanup guidance warns that items that cannot be cleaned and dried quickly should be discarded, and flood-affected carpet and padding often need removal.

If floodwater touched carpet and pad, do not treat it like normal carpet cleaning.

44. HVAC Concerns

Odor or contamination can spread through HVAC.

Check:

1. Return vents
2. Supply vents
3. Filter
4. Condensate pan
5. Duct odor
6. Airflow path
7. Closet air handler
8. Crawlspace duct leaks

Do not automatically assume ducts need cleaning, but do not ignore HVAC if odor is throughout the home.

45. Hardwood / LVP / Tile After Water

Hardwood

Can cup, crown, buckle, or trap moisture underneath.

LVP

Water may get below planks and become trapped.

Tile

Tile may look fine while water travels under baseboards or into adjoining rooms.

Laminate

Often swells and fails quickly.

Flooring type changes the drying plan.

46. Baseboards and Drywall

Wet carpet often means baseboards and drywall may be affected.

Check:

1. Swelling
2. Soft drywall
3. Staining
4. Paint bubbling
5. Musty smell
6. Moisture readings
7. Wet insulation behind walls

Sometimes small flood cuts are needed. Sometimes they are not. Readings should guide decisions.

47. Why "It Looks Fine" Is Not Enough

Water damage and odor are often invisible.

A room can look fine while:

1. Pad is wet
2. Subfloor is wet

3. Tack strip is contaminated
4. Baseboard is wet
5. Humidity is high
6. Odor source remains
7. Mold risk is increasing

Use inspection, not guessing.

48. The Best Consumer Decision Tree

If water is clean and recent:

Extract, dry, monitor, document.

If water is contaminated:

Protect people, remove contaminated porous materials, clean/disinfect, dry.

If odor is pet-related:

Find depth of contamination before cleaning.

If odor is smoke:

Clean residue before deodorizing.

If musty:

Find moisture source.

If stain:

Identify before treating.

If insurance/legal issue:

Document before altering.

49. Free Second Opinion Checklist

Send a pro:

1. 5-10 photos

2. What happened
3. When it happened
4. Water source
5. Rooms affected
6. Odor description
7. Carpet age if known
8. Whether pad is wet
9. Any health concerns
10. What has already been done

For free guidance, people can email: hsquaredcarpetquestions@gmail.com

50. Honest Consumer Message

Not every problem needs a professional.

But you should get professional advice when:

1. Water reached pad
2. Odor keeps returning
3. Pet urine is severe
4. Smoke odor is heavy
5. Mold is suspected
6. Insurance is involved
7. A child, elderly person, or immune-sensitive person is in the home
8. You are unsure whether materials should be dried or removed

Closing Statement

Most carpet, odor, and water problems become expensive because people wait, guess, or treat the wrong thing.

The best approach is simple:

Find the source. Stop the source. Document the damage. Dry quickly. Clean correctly. Treat odor at the source. Replace only when necessary.

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