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## A Strange Carpet Phenomenon

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A strange phenomenon often happens with wall-to-wall carpets, especially those installed in very large areas such as hotel ballrooms.

Its occurrence is random, often happening years after a carpet has been installed.

And although the causes are largely unknown, unfortunately, when it happens, cleaning professionals or carpet cleaning technicians are often blamed.

What we are referring to is called pile reversal, also known as watermarking, pooling or puddling.

This is when a cut piled carpet "shades," making some areas look lighter and others look darker than the surrounding pile.

Many times, it looks like a large area of the carpet is wet.

What's actually causing the odd appearance is the pile has changed or reversed direction, causing light to reflect differently on the carpet.

When pile reversal happens, homeowners as well as building owners and managers are typically upset, wanting to know how and why this has occurred.

Some of the first questions they often ask include the following:

- Is this caused by the actual carpet cleaning process? No.
- Is the cleaning professional or carpet cleaning technician at fault? No.
- Has the carpet been ruined or damaged? No.
- Is this the fault of the carpet manufacturer? No.
- Is it caused by the type of carpet fibers (nylon, wool, polyester, etc.)? No.
- Is it caused by the installation? No.
- Will it lead to premature wear and decreased durability? No.
- Can this be corrected? As we will discuss later, in most cases again, no.

Pile reversal is not new; in fact, it was likely more of a problem decades ago than it is today.

This is because many floor covering manufacturers have extensively researched the phenomenon in an effort to correct it; and yet, while they have been able to make some improvements in how carpet is manufactured, pile reversal still happens.

In fact, one result of this research is that some carpet manufacturers apply warning labels on their carpets so that consumers are aware that pile reversal can occur.

### **What Carpet Reversal Is Not**

Sometimes building owners, managers and cleaning professionals blame appearance changes in a carpet on pile reversal when something else entirely is occurring.

For instance, what is known as "tracking" is often thought to be pile reversal.

However, tracking is a flattening or crushing of the carpet, usually happening in heavily trafficked walkways or as a result of the wear characteristics of the carpet installed.

Unlike pile reversal, which can appear after carpet extraction, tracking often disappears after carpet extraction.

Frequent vacuuming along with raking the carpet in problem areas can help eliminate or minimize tracking.

Another carpet appearance change that is often characterized as pile reversal but is not is called "footmarking" or "footprinting."

This can occur if something is dragged over the carpet on a fairly regular basis or may be the result of people walking over a specific area.

The carpet is not necessarily flattened, as in tracking, but footprints are evident.

Also unlike tracking, which can be seen over a large area of the carpet, footmarking tends to be more localized.

Usually all that is necessary to correct this problem is to vacuum the area in various directions.

### **Dealing With Pile Reversal**

As already referenced, once pile reversal has occurred, it is typically permanent.

In some cases, if it is noticed shortly after carpet extraction, recleaning the problem area with an extractor may help minimize how noticeable the problem is.

Also, in some cases frequent vacuuming or raking of the problem areas will make the shading less noticeable.

However, this intervention only affects the top portion of the carpet fibers.

As the area is used and walked on, the pile will likely return to the reversed position and the watermarking will reappear.

While pile reversal is a rare problem, it does occur and is totally unpredictable.

It may even suddenly occur in carpets that have been installed for years and cleaned many times.

Although it can be unsightly, what is important to realize is that it is not anyone's fault; the carpet does not necessarily need to be replaced, and in fact it can still provide years of service.

It may just take a little getting used to.

*Doug Berjer has written extensively on cleaning, carpet cleaning and water conservation issues. He worked for a large JanSan distributorship in St. Louis, Missouri, as their equipment specialist and also worked as the operations manager for a large building service contractor that specialized in servicing shopping malls and anchor store retailers throughout North America. Doug is now brand manager for CFR, Continuous Flow Recycling extractors and Tornado Industries, both based out of West Chicago, Illinois.*