

## Pressing Matters

Has your dry cleaner damaged your clothes again? Let off steam! These wise buys could save you \$\$\$!

\* Each year in the US, 387.6 million pairs of pants, 277 million coats and suit jackets, and 443 million blouses, skirts and dresses go to the dry cleaner.



**Rowenta Commercial Garment Steamer, \$190**

This 1,500-watt's extra-large water tank holds a gallon of water for up to two-and-a-half hours of steaming and heats up in two minutes; Bed Bath & Beyond, 800-462-3966, or Rowenta, rowentausa.com for stores.

**Monique Lhuillier Strapless Pleated Cocktail Dress, \$2,150** (sizes 2-14); Monique Lhuillier, CA, 310-550-3388, or MN, 612-929-0747.

**I**'m not ashamed to admit that ironing is not my thing. But that doesn't mean I'm walking around a crumpled mess. On the contrary, I'm wrinkle-free even though I haven't ironed in months. I discovered the solution while watching a fashion stylist on a photo shoot wield her garment steamer, using it first to freshen up a skirt. Like magic, she just waved the wand over the fabric and presto! Perfect in seconds. In fact, the garment looked better than a lot of skirts fresh from the dry cleaner....

Kim Akhtar, owner and founder of Garde Robe, a company that stores and cares for out-of-season clothing for New Yorkers whose wardrobes exceed the size of their closets, wholeheartedly shares my enthusiasm. "I love steamers!" Kim says. "I have one at home and a few at work. We use them on everything from Oscar de la Renta evening gowns to Banana Republic blouses." And, she adds, "I find steaming very therapeutic. You stand there, you're going over the creases, you're looking at the garment and contemplating it, thinking about what shoes would go with it. It's very Zen."

Not to mention very *economical*. According to the Clothing Care National Habits and Practices survey, 75% of clothes sent to the dry cleaner merely need wrinkles and odors removed, not visible stains. By steaming garments in between trips to the dry cleaner, you'll save money and prevent the wear and tear on fabrics that solvents used in the dry cleaning process can cause, which means your clothes will last longer.

Steaming is easier on clothes than

regular ironing, too. There's no risk of scorching and you'll never get that awful fabric shine that can result from a too-hot iron. That's because steaming achieves a smooth, fresh finish by using heat and water to infuse the fabric and relax the fibers, causing wrinkles to simply fall away, while ironing heats the fabric and *crushes* the fibers. Another brilliant thing about garment steamers is that they aren't all that complicated. However, there are a few crucial features to look for.

**WHAT TO SPOT (BEFORE YOU BUY)**

**Steam power** How much steam you'll get depends largely on the wattage of the unit. A steamer with 1,300 watts of de-wrinkling muscle, like the **Jiffy J-2000M, \$209** (Gracious Home, 800-338-7809, or [jiffy-steamer.com](http://jiffy-steamer.com)), is ideal. Don't go below 1,100 watts and tread carefully with steamers above 1,500 watts since that much power can lead to overloaded circuit breakers, particularly if you're running the steamer on the same circuit as other high-wattage appliances like air conditioners and blow-dryers.

**Water reservoir** The size of the water reservoir determines how long you can steam without refilling. A recent Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers survey showed that most people only steam for an average of 15 minutes at a time, but it's nice to have the option to keep going. A two-quart tank will give you about an hour's worth of steam. Most tanks are made of plastic; you want one that's transparent so you can

**Good and Steamed!**

Our three favorite steamers based on power, tank capacity and heat-up time.



**Jiffy J-2000M, \$209**

Heats up in less than two minutes and provides one-and-a-half hours of continuous steam; Gracious Home, 800-338-7809, or [jiffysteamer.com](http://jiffysteamer.com).

**Homedics Home Touch Perfect Steamer, \$49.99**

Supplies 1,500 watts of wrinkle-removing power and the tank's 44 ounce water capacity allows you to steam 20-25 garments; Best Buy, 888-237-8289, or [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).



easily check the water level. A built-in handle makes it simple to remove the tank to refill or clean it—something you'll need to do twice a year or so to remove mineral deposits.

**Hose length** For most at-home steaming jobs, a five-foot hose is ideal. However, extra-long hoses (six feet and longer) can be convenient for steaming out-of-reach items like curtains. But a too-long hose can be awkward to handle and may damage clothes since moisture can accumulate inside it and then spurt out all over your garment. To prevent this, stretch out the hose periodically to allow any moisture in it to run back into the water reservoir where it belongs.

**Steam heads** A five- or six-inch-wide steam head with five to eight steam holes is perfect for use on most garments since it's small enough to maneuver around tricky bits like collars and sleeves, but big enough to cover large items quickly. Though you can get a steam head in (cheaper) plastic,

most experts recommend the metal variety. "Metal is more durable," says Clint Joiner, product manager of Jiffy Steamer Company. "It also gets warmer and will decrease the amount of condensation in the steam head." This translates into a lower risk of water burst, which can damage fragile fabrics.

If you're steaming delicate materials like lace, silk or velvet, a metal head is safer than a plastic one since it's a better conductor of heat, allowing you to get a crisper finish without ever touching the head to the garment—a move that can result in stained or burnt clothing. And when you're working on durable fabrics like cotton, a metal head can be used more aggressively to come closer to approximating the neat press of an iron.

There are other types of heads that can turn your steamer into a multitasking dynamo. The **Rowenta Commercial Garment Steamer, \$190** (see previous page; Bed Bath & Beyond, 800-462-3966, or Rowenta,

rowentausa.com for stores), comes with two brushes (one for fabric, one for upholstery) that attach to the head and gently open up the weave of the fabric, allowing steam to penetrate more effectively. Although you can purchase heads separately, be advised that they are usually not interchangeable from one brand to another.

**Design extras** Most steamers are mounted on a stand with wheels, a real plus when you want to use your steamer throughout the house to freshen up sofas, armchairs and mattresses. An on/off foot control and swiveling garment pole keep your hands free. Be sure your steamer has an automatic off function (an important safety feature) and also look for one that heats up quickly. The **Homedics Home Touch Perfect Steamer, \$49.99** (see previous page; Best Buy, 888-237-8289, or amazon.com), is ready to start busting wrinkles in as little as 45 seconds. —CAROLE NICKSIN

## Fire your dry cleaner! 6 additional products that treat your clothes (and your wallet) right.

**1.** Inventions like the **Whirlpool Fabric Freshener, \$249** (Best Buy, 888-237-8289, or bestbuy.com), make us happy to be living in the 21st century. Hang your clothes inside the 58" Dacron twill "tent" and zip it up. When you return 20–30 minutes later, clothes are wrinkle- and odor-free. How? Although the appliance uses only water, the temperature reaches 114 degrees, changing the chemistry of odors and releasing them. When you're done, the contraption folds into its plastic base (10"h x 33"l x 12"d) for easy storage. **2.** Steaming against a solid surface gives you more control than when the garment is on a hanger, but heat and moisture from the steamer can harm paint or wallpaper. The solution? The **Jiffy Steamboard, \$71** (24"w x 48"l x 1"d; Western Costume, CA, 818-760-0902, or jiffysteamer.com), a protective particleboard surface that hangs over the back of any door. **3.** Food spills happen. That's why **Tide-to-Go, \$2.99** (Target or Wal-Mart), is permanently in our purses. To instantly remove food from clothing (it's safe to

use on delicate and dry-clean-only fabrics), press the pen tip on the spot and rub gently. **4.** This **Tide Buzz Ultrasonic Stain Remover, \$49.99** (Target or blackanddecker.com), uses ultrasonic energy waves combined with a new Tide formula to erase everything from red wine to tomato sauce. Safe on all fabrics. **5.** SHOP Etc. staffers were clamoring to try the **Evercare Small Fabric Shaver, \$8.99** (Gracious Home, 800-338-7890, or gracioushome.com). It's tiny, the fuzz reservoir stays secure during use and it removes pills quickly and thoroughly, without munching holes in clothes. Safe on wool, cashmere and synthetic blends. **6.** Portable, packable travel steamers don't have the power of full-size models, so don't expect them to remove all the wrinkles from, say, a crumpled cotton shirt. But they will freshen up a suit that's suffered too many hours in a suitcase. Look for one with at least 600 watts of power, like the **Jiffy Esteam, \$69** (John Belmont Company, IL, 773-282-2882, or jiffysteamer.com), which holds 8 oz. of water for 15 minutes of steaming. 

