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## clearing the air on *Vacuums*

TEXT BY REBECCA DAY PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHNNY MILLER



THERE'S NOTHING LIKE an old, wheezing vacuum cleaner to make you appreciate how important a properly performing appliance is to your cleaning regimen. The good news, if you haven't shopped for one lately, is that the modern vacuum cleaner has made great strides in features, style, and convenience. Today's models not only remove dust and dirt, they also tackle

more challenging household irritants, such as pet hair and allergens. And there is also a multitude of attachments available to bolster efficiency.

By matching a vacuum to your environment and lifestyle, you can make the most out of the time you spend cleaning. On the following pages are several issues to consider before deciding what kind of vacuum to purchase.

**AIR FORCE ONE** Your vacuum is one of the most important and versatile tools in your cleaning arsenal. Choosing between an upright model and a canister will depend primarily on your home's surfaces.



### canister attachments for hard floors

Attachments designed for wood, tile, vinyl, and other hard surfaces have stationary brushes rather than roller brushes to prevent scratching.

① **PARQUET-FLOOR BRUSH** With brush strips encircling all four edges, this tool is gentle on wood. The notches allow for better airflow, which improves suction.

② **CARPET & HARD-FLOOR NOZZLE** Also known as a universal nozzle, this tool is designed for hard floors, as well as delicate rugs and no-pile carpets. The lever on the top of the nozzle toggles a brush strip, which descends to keep the nozzle's bottom edge from causing scuffs on hard surfaces and retracts for cleaning carpets.

③ **STANDARD HARD-FLOOR BRUSH** This works on all hard surfaces. Brush strips along the front and back edges and wheels on each side allow for smooth gliding.

IF YOU LIVE IN A SMALL HOUSE OR AN APARTMENT, YOU CAN STILL REAP THE POWER OF A FULL-SIZE VACUUM IN A COMPACT DESIGN THAT'S EASY TO STORE.

#### FLOOR TYPE

For homes with more carpets and rugs than hard floors, upright vacuum cleaners with roller brushes that reach deep down to loosen dust and dirt are best. If you'll be vacuuming several kinds of carpet, look for a model that switches between low- and high-pile settings. If you'll be vacuuming carpeting and hard floors, choose a model that lets you turn off the roller brush (this will ensure that you don't scratch wood, tile, or other surfaces).

For woolen and delicate carpets and rugs, the Carpet and Rug Institute, a nonprofit trade association, recommends using a vacuum cleaner that has only suction (such as a stick vacuum or one that allows you to turn off the roller brush).

Canisters are best if you will be primarily vacuuming hard floors. They're also better than uprights for vacuuming stairs and getting under furniture and into other hard-to-reach areas. They're also easier to carry, making them ideal for multilevel homes.

Depending on the surfaces you plan to clean with a canister, you may have to use multiple attachments: a floor brush with bristles (but no moving parts) for hard surfaces; a turbo or power nozzle with a roller brush for pile carpeting; and a carpet and hard-floor nozzle with a smooth bottom for hard surfaces and Berber or natural-fiber carpets (sisal and sea grass, for example), which might be damaged by bristles or the motion of a roller brush.

Note that attachments may need to be purchased separately, which would add to the overall cost.

#### AMOUNT OF SPACE

If you live in a small house or an apartment, you can still reap the twelve-amp power of a full-size vacuum in a compact or lightweight design. Compact vacuums typically include a telescoping hose, which makes them easier to store. They generally weigh less than twelve pounds, and they're easier to navigate under beds and around furniture.

If you live in a large house, you will want the benefits of a full-size vacuum cleaner. Not only will it make a larger swath with each pass, but the greater dust capacity means you won't have to change bags or empty dustbins as often. Remember to look for a model with the automatic-cord-rewind option.

#### AIRFLOW AND SUCTION

Rugs and carpets that are subjected to heavy foot traffic require a vacuum with superior airflow and suction. Airflow is measured in cubic feet per minute (CFM). Most vacuums have an airflow of sixty to eighty CFM; that number can be much higher in machines of superior quality. Suction is measured by a vacuum's "water lift"—how many inches of water could be lifted through a tube if it were attached to the vacuum hose. A water lift of eighty to one hundred inches is considered good. Many manufacturers



### canister attachments for pile carpeting

*These attachments have roller brushes, which coax dirt to the surface of pile carpeting for better cleaning. Match the nozzle to your carpet. High-pile wall-to-wall carpeting, for instance, will require a more powerful nozzle than a low-pile area rug.*

#### ① STANDARD POWER NOZZLE

The roller brush of the power nozzle is driven by electricity for superior cleaning ability. Air-powered turbo nozzles, though similar in appearance, have less power and are better for low-pile carpeting and small area rugs.

② BATTERY-POWERED NOZZLE Rather than relying on the electrical supply of the vacuum, this nozzle uses a battery pack and can be more powerful than a standard one.

③ ADJUSTABLE POWER NOZZLE This deluxe tool lets you raise or lower the roller brush depending on the carpet's pile height.

## ALLERGY SUFFERERS SHOULD AVOID BAGLESS VACUUMS, BECAUSE DUST AND ALLERGEN PARTICLES CAN BECOME AIRBORNE DURING THE MESSY PROCESS OF EMPTYING THE DUSTBIN.

don't advertise these numbers, though; you may have to do some research on the Internet or consult a salesperson.

### AIR QUALITY

In recent years, the vacuum cleaner's role in controlling indoor air quality has become increasingly important. Most manufacturers now offer models with HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filters, which are guaranteed to capture 99.97 percent of dust and allergen particles, measuring 0.3 microns and larger, including pet dander. (For comparison, a typical human hair measures about one hundred microns, or one-tenth of a millimeter.) Filters should be replaced every year.

Filters installed in a sealed environment, sometimes referred to as "true HEPA," ensure that dust and allergens can't escape through gaps in the vacuum cleaner's frame.

Allergy sufferers should avoid bagless vacuums—dust and allergen particles can become airborne during the process of emptying the dustbin. They may wish to purchase an ultraviolet vacuum, which uses ultraviolet light to kill dust mites, mold, bacteria, and other allergens found in carpet fibers.

### PETS

A mini or handheld turbo brush—included with some models, but also available separately—is essential for removing hair and dander from your pet's favorite upholstery (the sooner this is done, the better). You may also consider cyclonic suction, a feature offered by several manufacturers. This

spins debris away from the filter, which prevents hair from building up and impeding the vacuum's suction.

Yet another filter option, "active HEPA," uses charcoal to remove odors from the vacuum's exhaust—a definite advantage for those with pets.

### DUSTING

Most vacuums come with basic accessories, including a crevice tool, a round dust brush, and an upholstery attachment. Optional extras include a telescoping duster (for crown molding and ceiling-fan blades) and edge cleaners (whiskers on the sides of the vacuum that clean carpet close to baseboards).



**TAKING IT ALL IN** Precise suction control is an important feature if you use your vacuum regularly to dust. Some models, such as the canister above, offer a number of preset suction levels; others have rheostat or slide-bar suction controls.



### attachments 101

These vacuum attachments can make a host of housekeeping tasks easier.

① **UPHOLSTERY TOOL** Use this to dust furniture, draperies, and mattresses. To avoid damage, be sure to reduce the suction when vacuuming delicate fabrics and draperies.

② **CREVICE TOOL** This attachment's narrow dimensions allow it to capture crumbs between sofa cushions and other tight spots. It's also ideal for dusting along baseboards and radiators and under appliances.

③ **DUST BRUSH** The most versatile of the vacuum's attachments can be used on almost any surface, including windowsills, blinds, and books. Buy extras and keep one for delicate chores, such as dusting lampshades, and another for messy jobs, such as removing soot from the area surrounding a fireplace.

④ **HANDHELD TURBO BRUSH** The air-powered roller brush in this tool rakes up pet hair with ease. It's also good for cleaning carpeted stairs and napped upholstery fabrics. SEE THE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

### specialty vacuums

The following vacuums hit the spot when it comes to small jobs. Power is measured in amps for corded models and in volts for cordless models. All but the robotic cleaners are available in corded and cordless options.



**ROBOTIC CLEANERS** Turn on a robotic vacuum cleaner and it will automatically clean a room and recharge itself as needed. These models, which include roller brushes, will self-adjust for carpets and hard floors; the newest ones are designed to handle carpet fringe.



#### ELECTRIC BROOMS AND SWEEPERS

These replacements for traditional brooms and dustpans are best for hard floors or low-pile carpets with dry debris. They do not come with any attachments or specialized filters.



**HANDHELDS** The most versatile of the specialty vacuums, handhelds come in a range of shapes and sizes and with an array of attachments. Choose from wet/dry pickup, cyclonic suction, HEPA filtration, and onboard accessories, including dust brushes and crevice tools.



**STICK VACS** Similar in style and operation to a regular vacuum cleaner, stick vacuums tend to have all of the features found in the handheld category (with the exception of wet/dry pickup) and more power. All models have roller brushes; some have a detachable handheld built in.



**SHOP VACS** Also called wet/dry vacs, shop vacs are built for the toughest and dirtiest jobs. Select a model with at least a seven-amp motor and a dust bag, which will protect the filter and extend the vacuum's life. Most models come in the canister style, but wall-mounted versions, with hoses reaching upward of twenty feet, are a good choice for smaller spaces.