

Clear Up Confusion About Wood Floor Maintenance

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As wood floors have grown in popularity, so have products and ideas about how to maintain a wood floor. There are HGTV hosts telling viewers to use apple cider vinegar mixed with water for a "green" wood floor cleaner, commercials hawking mops that use hot steam to sanitize a floor, and even a popular author recommending that people use olive oil to clean their wood floors. It's no wonder that consumers get confused about what they should do to maintain their floor ... and no wonder that wood flooring contractors come across some real messes when they visit the homes of complaining customers. Here are some common wood floor maintenance questions today's consumers are asking, and answers you can give them.

Q: Can I use one of those steam cleaners advertised on TV on my wood floor?

Everyone has seen the commercials showing a steam cleaner magically sanitizing, disinfecting, deodorizing, and cleaning a wood floor. But that doesn't mean that wood flooring manufacturers or finish manufacturers think steam cleaners are appropriate for a wood floor; in fact, some have begun to specifically mention steam cleaners in their list of don'ts. Inspectors are also starting to come across floors that appear to have been destroyed by repeated steam cleaner use. Peeling finish, whitening finish and cloudy finish are just some of the side effects being reported by people looking at floors after steam cleaning. In general, the oft-repeated industry saying "Water and wood don't mix" holds true. Unless the wood flooring or finish manufacturer says it's OK, it's safest to assume steam cleaning is a no-no on a wood floor.

Q: I read that a good wood floor cleaner is vinegar with water; is that OK?

Vinegar and water used to be a typical recommendation for cleaning wood floors with a urethane type of finish. These days, however, most manufacturers recommend cleaners that are specifically formulated for wood floor finishes; in fact, vinegar is acidic, and using too much could damage the finish. People who insist on still using vinegar should use plain vinegar—not apple cider vinegar, red wine vinegar or any other type, which could leave a sticky residue on the floor.



A prefinished solid wood floor damaged by repeated use of a steam mop cleaner.

Q: I keep hearing that I should find out which maintenance products are recommended by the finish manufacturer. But I have no idea whose finish is on our wood floors. What should I use?

The vast majority of wood floors around today, whether they were finished on-site or are factory-finished, have some sort of urethane-type finish. For those finishes, a cleaner recommended by any major wood floor finish or wood floor manufacturer should be just fine. (To check if your floor has some other type of finish on it, and what to do if it does, see page 3 below "Which Finish Do You Have?") A safe bet is to stop by a local wood flooring retailer and find out what they recommend and sell for use on wood floors. Not all maintenance products that are labeled for use on wood floors are recommended by major finish and wood flooring manufacturers. (In fact, some may even void your floor's warranty.)

Q: I've been using a product on my wood floor that says it is a wood polish/conditioner. Now it seems like my floor has a sticky film all over it, and I can see footprints in it. How do I get this residue off?

Unfortunately, many consumers are bewildered to discover

that, although the product they used said on the label it was for wood floors, it wasn't really recommended for wood floor finishes ... and now they have a big mess on their hands. Some of these products seem to leave a film on the floor that is very difficult to remove. Others may not leave a sticky film but may cause contamination problems down the road when the floor needs to be refinished. If you know the manufacturer of the wood floor or the finish on the floor, call and ask for their recommendation as to what to do. If you don't know, you'll need to call a local wood flooring professional. He or she may be able to use a product specifically designed for stripping such residue off a floor. If not, the floor will probably require sanding.

Q: Can I vacuum my wood floors?

Vacuuming wood floors is a great idea. Dirt and particles that are left on the floor act like an abrasive when people walk on them, so vacuuming them as often as possible will prolong the life of the finish. One caveat: Don't use a vacuum with a beater bar, which can damage the finish.

Q: We bought a different area rug to go under our dining room table, and it's a different shape from the old one. Now you can see the lines of where the old ones were. How do I get rid of them?

Wood is a natural product, and as it oxidizes and is exposed to light, it changes color. Some species—American cherry, Brazilian cherry and others, especially exotics—are known to change color drastically. There is no way to prevent this, although waiting as long as possible (ideally, at least six months) after the floor is installed to place rugs can help. So can moving area rugs from time to time. If you already have distinct lines on the floor, though, there isn't usually a quick fix to remove them (even sanding won't always remove the color difference). The unexposed part of the floor will eventually "catch up" to the rest of the floor, if you can live with looking at the floor as-is until then.

Q: I moved the throw rugs I had in my kitchen, and now I can see the pattern of the back of the rug on the floor. How do I get that off?

Many area rugs have backings that grip the floor but are unkind to wood floor finishes. The plasticizers in the backings actually damage the finish; it's this chemical change that is creating the pattern you see on the floor. So, unfortunately, no amount of cleaning is going to remove what you see. Having the floor abraded and recoated by a professional may be enough to remove the marks; but it's likely that the floor must be sanded. In the future, remember that only rugs with a natural backing are safe to use on a wood floor.

Q: I thought my contractor could just put new finish on my floors, but he's telling me they should be sanded. What does that mean? How do you know?

When your contractor talks about "recoating," that means he's going to lightly abrade the finish on the floor and put a new coat of finish on, or he's going to use a chemical recoating system that can put a new coat of finish on the floor without any abrasion. When he says "sand," that means sanding the floor down to the bare wood and starting over—a much longer and involved process.

One big indicator that tells you if you need a recoat or a sand is how much finish is left on the floor. If there are bare spots on the floor, where there isn't any finish left, you can't just recoat. A floor with bare spots has to be sanded.

Beyond that, recoating versus sanding is largely a matter of your expectations. If you want your floor to look like new, you will need a sand. If you can live with still seeing some scratches, dents and other damage to the floor, recoating is probably the way to go. Be aware, though, that recoating can seem to highlight the imperfections that are left in the floor. (To see examples of the sort of damage that does and doesn't go away with typical recoating, see the "Realistic Recoating" on pages 3 and 4.)

Q: I saw a product at a big box store that says it will restore the shine to my floor; I just have to clean the floor and mop it on. Can I do that instead of getting my floors recoated?

There are various products on the market that promise to make your floor look like new without having to actually sand or recoat the floor. These products are usually an extremely thin finish that you can apply yourself.

The first thing with such products is to make sure they will be compatible with the finish on the floor and won't contaminate your floor for future recoating. If you know the manufacturer of your finish or your floor (in the case of a factory-finished floor), ask them before using the product.

Second, be aware of typical pitfalls when using a product such as this. You must clean your floor extremely well before applying the product; if you don't, you'll be adhering dirt and debris right into the floor. Also, be aware that, because the product is so thin, it wears off quickly and often unevenly. So, no, products like these aren't anything like the results you would get from having your floor professionally recoated.

Q: I have a squeak in the old wood floors in one of my bedrooms. I read that I can put baby powder in the floor to fix the squeak. Does that work?

Getting talcum powder or graphite into the small gaps around squeaking boards may be a short-term fix, although any time you put something that isn't recommended on the floor you run a risk of contaminating the floor for future recoats. The best option for squeaks is to solve the problem, which, for squeaking floors, is a loose board. There are many ways and products to address that, from screwing down the board from below to using epoxy repair kits.

Maintenance Mantras

These guidelines apply to any wood floor. Following them will help your floor go longer between recoating and sanding:

- * Sweep and/or vacuum the floor as often as possible.
- * Never, ever wet-mop a floor.
- * Only use cleaners that are recommended by major wood floor finish or wood floor manufacturers.
- * Use walkoff mats and area rugs at all doorways.
- * Put floor protectors on the bottom of all furniture and anything else (baby ExerSaucers, toys, etc.) that might rub on the wood floor.
- * Wipe up all spills immediately. Products such as Kool-Aid will stain most finishes if left on the floor.
- * Keep pet nails trimmed. Know that dogs running through the house will scratch any finish.
- * Consider using runners/area rugs in high-traffic areas.
- * Keep your home at normal living conditions for your area—no extremes of humidity or temperature.

Which Finish Do You Have?

Most floors these days have some kind of urethane finish, but there are a few other types of finish that may be on the floor, especially if it's very old.

One is wax. To test for wax, there are several options (always test in an inconspicuous place, such as in a closet):

- * Put a little mineral spirits on a white rag and rub it on the floor. If the rag turns yellow/brown, the finish is probably wax.
- * Allow a couple drops of water to sit on the floor. If the finish turns white after about 10 minutes, it's probably wax.
- * Rub a spot on the floor with sandpaper. If the finish balls up, it's likely wax.

In many ways, wax floors require standard maintenance, such as sweeping, vacuuming and wiping up spills immediately. However, wax floors should not be cleaned with a standard wood floor cleaner. When they lose luster in heavy traffic areas, they should be buffed with a polishing brush or pad. White spots from moisture can be rubbed with fine steel wool, a soft cloth or a synthetic pad and a small amount of mineral spirits until the spot is gone. Then the area should be rewaxed and rebuffed.

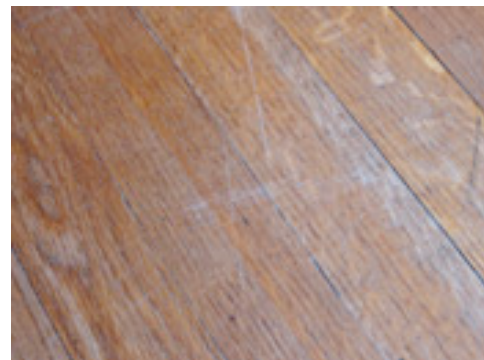
Another possible finish on an older floor is shellac or varnish. If you scrape a spot on the floor with a hard object such as a coin and the finish flakes off, it is probably shellac or varnish, which can be maintained like a urethane finish.

Realistic Recoating

Recoating a floor can help make a floor look better and add years of protection, but it won't usually make a floor look brand new. Here are some examples of floor wear and what to expect from a recoat:



Dents, such as these from furniture legs, will not be hidden by recoating.



Areas where the floor looks grey to black and the finish is worn off entirely indicate a floor that needs sanding.



Spots such as this hair trapped in the finish will be visible after recoating unless they are hand-scraped out first; the minor scratches should disappear.



Moisture damage, such as these black lines at board edges from a leaking Christmas tree stand, will still be visible after recoating.

More Photos Of Maintenance Issues:



Depending on how deep these marks from a Sharpie marker have penetrated the finish will determine if they will come out with a recoat.

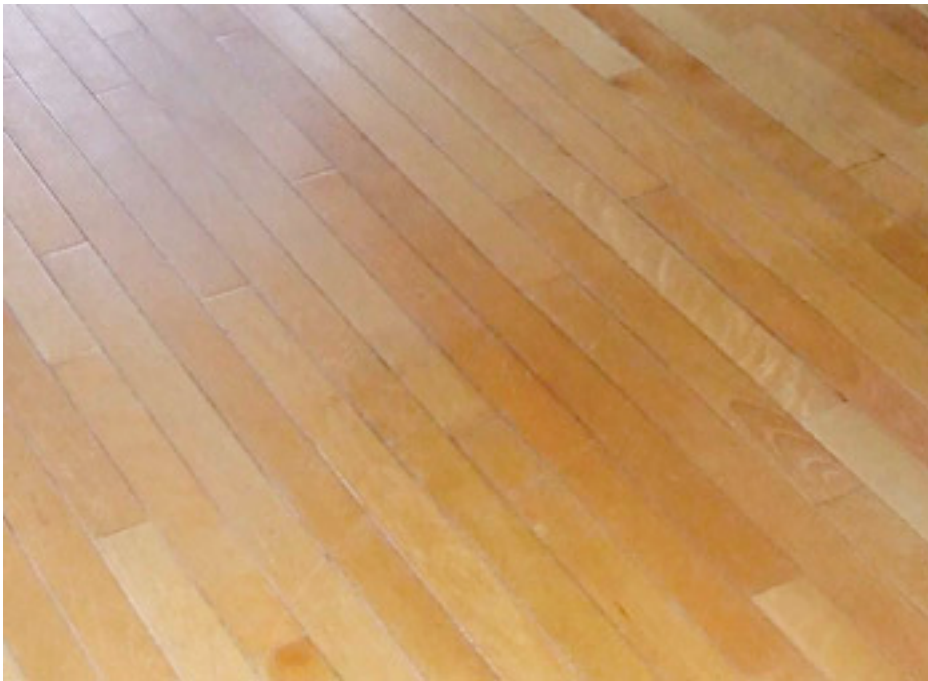


Mystery marks such as this green smudge are an unknown as to whether they will or won't come out.

A prefinished solid wood floor and baseboard show damage caused by repeated use of a steam mop cleaner.



*A prefinished solid wood floor
damaged by repeated use of a
steam mop cleaner.*



*Gray lines along the edges of
these boards are damage
resulting from a steam mop
cleaner.*

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