

# How to Properly Clean a Hardwood Floor

A Special Report to help you care for  
and maintain your hardwood floors.



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With the proper care and maintenance, hardwood floors can last a lifetime. However, many consumers and cleaning professionals are either uninformed or misinformed as to how to properly care for wood flooring. They tend to use potentially damaging generic floor cleaners found on the shelves of their local grocery stores or discount retailers. Often times, these products are not appropriate for wood floors or even recommended by the finish or flooring manufacturer. In fact, using such products may actually void the manufacturer's warranty.

Fortunately for today's consumers, caring for wood floors requires much less effort than in the past when wax flooring was the preeminent choice. Most of today's wood floors have a surface building finish that allows for easy care and maintenance. Regardless of the finish, style, or species, one thing remains abundantly clear - maintenance is key! A good maintenance routine that protects the finish from scratches and moisture can add years to the life of your floor.

While it's true that cleaning methods vary based on finish types, the following general maintenance guidelines apply to all residential and commercial wood floors and finishes.

**Sweeping & Vacuuming** – Use a soft bristle broom, dry dust mop, or vacuum to routinely remove the grit and grime that accumulates on the floor. Left unattended, dirt particles can work like an abrasive when trapped under footwear and scratch and de-gloss the floor. Use a vacuum that does not have a rotating beater bar, as it can damage the finish.

**Window Coverings** – Wood is a natural product and thereby affected by light. Prolonged exposure to ultraviolet rays can have a dramatic effect on the exposed wood and fading or bleaching may occur. Window treatments can go a long way in helping to keep your wood's color intact.

**Area Rugs & Floor Mats** – It's good practice to place area rugs at all entrances, pivot points, high-traffic areas, near sinks, and/or any other place where dirt or water may accumulate. Be wary of rubber backed mats and non-slip rug pads, as they can be unkind to the floor's finish. The pattern on the non-slip mat may actually imprint onto the floor. Rugs, mats and pads with natural backings are your best bet. Keep in mind that the use of area rugs may cause shading differences in the floor due to light exposure.

**Floor Protectors** – Install floor protector pads to the bottom of anything that will come in contact with the floor. This includes all furniture, baby items, large toys, etc. Never slide or drag heavy items across the floor, as wood finishes can easily scratch and mar under extreme pressure.

**Other Protective Measures** – Some other ideas include keeping shoes in good repair. High heels in particular are a threat if they lose their protective cap and the nail is exposed. Obviously, all athletic cleats and spikes should be left at the door. As far as pets go, make sure their nails are clipped and trimmed regularly. Wipe spills immediately and pay close attention to the flooring around the dishwasher, refrigerator, house plants, or any other areas prone to spills or leaks. Finally, keep the temperature in-line with normal living conditions in your area, as extremes of humidity and temperature can wreak havoc on wood floors.

The following section attempts to clear-up any misconceptions regarding commonly recommended wood cleaners. Steer clear of the following cleaning agents and methods, as they can cause serious damage to virtually every floor type and finish.

**Vinegar** – Once the 1950's approach to cleaning hardwood floors, vinegar is no longer recommend, as its acid properties can actually etch the surface of the wood.

**Ammonia** – Ammonia will cause discoloration and deterioration and will dull the finish, thus taking years off the life of the floor.

**Wax and Oil-Based Detergents** – Not only can they damage the finish, but they also leave a sticky residue on the surface of the wood.

**Dust Products** – These should also be avoided at all costs, as they leave a slippery coating on the surface that can cause injury.

**Wet Mop** – Your mop should never be more than slightly damp. Excess water is the number one culprit when it comes to damaging the wood and finish.

**Steam Cleaning** – Steam cleaners can cause peeling, cracking and whitening and leave a cloudy finish on the floor's surface.

Now that we have established some general maintenance guidelines and protective measures for wood floors, our attention turns to the finish. Wood structure (engineered vs. solid) and species (oak vs. cherry) have very little to do in determining the appropriate cleaning method. It's the finish that matters. The finish refers to the top coat that will protect your floor from everyday wear and tear and also provide color and luster. Wood floor finishes are typically divided into two categories: those that sit on the wood's surface (**surface finishes**) and those that penetrate the wood (**penetrating finishes**). Keep in mind that it is the finish, not the wood that you are cleaning.

More than 90% of the wood floors on the market today have a surface finish. If you are not sure, look to see if the floor has what appears to be a film build-up. If so, it's more than likely a surface finish. A flat, matte surface would indicate a penetrating finish.

If you are still uncertain, try this simple test. Take 120 grit sand paper and rub into the wood in an inconspicuous place like behind a door or in a closet. If you are able to rub into the color of the wood, it's a penetrating finish. If not, you are dealing with a surface finish. In the next section, we will take a look at the various finishes and the appropriate cleaning methods for each.

**Surface Building Finishes** – These finishes are very popular today because they are durable, water-resistant and easy to maintain. Commonly referred to as urethanes or polyurethanes, these finishes remain on the surface of the wood to form a protective coating. Surface finishes include, Water-Based Urethane, Oil-Modified Urethane, Acid Cured Finish (Swedish Finish or Conversion Varnish), Moisture-Cured Urethane and Aluminum Oxide UV Cured Finish.

Specific maintenance and cleaning for these floors include:

**Daily Maintenance** – As previously mentioned, all wood floors require a little TLC. Vacuum and sweep, keep dirt and grime to a minimum, and wipe spills immediately.

**Cleaning Products** – Consult the manufacturer for a list of recommended cleaning products. Using a product not endorsed by the finish or flooring manufacturer can void the warranty. If you do not know the manufacturer of the floor, consult a local flooring professional for a recommendation.

**Mopping Technique** – Too much water is wood's worst enemy. Be careful to use a damp mop rather than one that's soaking wet, and be sure to mop in the direction of the wood grain. When the water gets dirty, empty the bucket and prepare a new batch of cleaning solution before continuing.

**Moisture Control** – Wipe spills immediately, and be careful to maintain humidity levels appropriate for the climate and season.

**Penetrating Finishes** – Once the standard, they have waned in popularity due to the advent of lower maintenance surface finishes. Unlike surface finishes, these types of finishes actually penetrate into the wood's cellular structure. Wax and oil are among the more common penetrating finishes. Cleaning methods do vary slightly from wax to oil floors. The following outlines specific methods for each:

**Wax Finishes** – As with any wood floor, a maintenance program including sweeping and vacuuming is key. Use a product recommended by the finish or floor manufacturer. If you are not sure of the manufacturer, consult a wood flooring professional for a recommendation. **NEVER** clean or wet mop a wax floor with water or use a wax or cleaner that requires water. Water can dull the finish and permanently damage the floor. To restore luster in heavy traffic areas, buff those areas with a polishing brush or pad. At some point the floor will need to be stripped down and rewaxed.

**Oil Finishes** – Again, follow a maintenance routine of sweeping, removing grime, etc. Use a manufacturer-recommended product or ask a wood care professional if you are not sure. Natural Soap products are the best for maintaining these type floors. Lastly, buff the

floor clean with a clean, dry cloth. Periodically, the finish will need to be professionally reapplied.

It's important to make sure the HVAC system is in working order. Wood is naturally porous and can absorb and release moisture, so the indoor relative humidity should be between 35 percent and 50 percent year round. Also temperature should be maintained between 60 and 80 degrees. Do not shut down the ventilating system for a prolonged period of time. Periodically check for tightening or shrinkage and inspect the areas around the windows and doors in wet weather. Immediately wipe any leaks or spills that you find.

### **Ares of Concern**

If your floors are **cupping** (the edges of the boards are higher than the center) or **buckling** (when wood boards rise and pull away from the subfloor), or you can't seem to restore its once lustrous finish, the problem is far beyond the scope of general maintenance and cleaning. Each of these issues has specific treatment options and solutions that only a professional floor care consultant can provide.

### **Final Thoughts**

These basic guidelines on how to clean hardwood floors will help protect your investment by extending the life of the floor and finish. If you have question about something that was not addressed in this white paper, please feel free to contact **The Philadelphia Floor Store** (1-800-737-1786) for more information.