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Cleaning Tile and Grout

In order to properly clean grout, one must first identify the floor type being addressed.

When it comes to tile and grout cleaning, building service contractors (BSCs) and carpet cleaning technicians who have expanded into the care of hard surface floors must first understand the types of floors with which they are dealing.

A natural stone floor is typically cleaned in a different manner than a manmade vinyl composition tile (VCT) floor is maintained.

The different types of stone floors — marble, granite, sandstone, limestone, slate, etc. — can actually get soiled at different rates, usually depending on the texture.

And, many require the use of specific cleaning chemicals and systems to not only maintain the floor but also preserve it.

Using the wrong chemical or the incorrect machine on certain floors can cause permanent damage.

In some cases, identifying what type of floor a customer has installed is easy; all you have to do is ask.

An astute property manager, especially if he or she was involved with selecting the floor, will likely have information pertaining to the type of floor and, if the records are complete, will offer suggestions on how to clean and maintain it and provide warnings regarding what products should be avoided.

However, even in those cases where installation information is available, it is still wise to be perceptive when it comes to hard surface floor identification.

Are There Holes In The Floor?

VCT, which includes porcelain and ceramic tiles, is still the most common type of floor installed in commercial facilities.

But, because the varieties and styles of VCT floors are far greater now than in years past, you might not be sure a floor is VCT.

A simple way to check is to ask if there is an unlaid piece available.

If it is VCT and manmade, it will have a flat surface on the bottom, likely with the manufacturer's marking.

If it is stone, the top and bottom will be similar and no marking will be found.

Many types of VCT are more impervious to foot traffic, stains and spills than stone floors and are far less absorbent.

But, many other types of hard surface floors are porous, with thousands of little holes on the tile's surface.

This can make a big difference in how the floor is cleaned and maintained.

To determine if the floor is porous, pour a small amount of water on the surface.

After a few minutes, wipe the area clean.

If there is a water mark or if the floor has darkened, the floor is porous.

This type of floor, especially in a commercial setting, should be sealed for protection.

Dry cleaning methods are preferable; if water or chemical is necessary, keep it at a minimum.

When it comes to cleaning, two other identification issues to be aware of are texture and composition.

Texture

If the floor is flat, it can be maintained using a variety of cleaning tools from flat mops to automatic scrubbers.

However, with a textured floor, mopping can be difficult and may leave small water “puddles” that can damage the floor or become contaminated.

A good option is to use a “multiwash” floor machine that can be used on both carpets and hard surface floors.

These machines use brushes, not pads, so they adjust to the floor's textured surface and reach down into the surrounding grout.

Mineral composition

This can get a bit technical, but some stone floor surfaces have a chemical composition that does not react well with certain floor care chemicals.

Find an inconspicuous area and test the floor using a solvent such as paint stripper.

In most cases, if the area becomes white, use non-solvent chemicals.

Another testing procedure involves using diluted phosphoric acid.

If after an hour the floor fizzles due to the acid, only non-acidic chemicals can be used.

Still another test requires applying a small amount of an alkaline cleaner on the floor.

If the floor dulls where the alkaline has been applied, a neutral-pH cleaner is required.

Grout Concerns

Identifying the type of floor installed is the first big step in tile and grout cleaning; the second is taking a look at the grout.

For instance, in most cases, you will find that the grout was sealed when the floor was installed.

This will help protect the grout and make it easier to clean.

This does not mean, however, that it is impervious to all stains and spills.

Even chemicals used to clean the floor can leave a residue in the grout area.

When this happens, grout discoloration is the first sign that soils, mildew and bacteria are building up.

Eventually, the entire floor will likely need to be resealed to prevent further discoloration; but, before that is done, it must be cleaned.

The following are some dos and don'ts when it comes to grout cleaning.

Dos:

- Make sure the area being cleaned is properly ventilated
- Read and follow the chemical manufacturer's use and dilution instructions
- Use a neutral-pH cleaner and test it first to ensure it does not damage the grout
- Wear proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including goggles
- If machine cleaning, use equipment with brushes, as a rotary pad machine may not be able to reach deep into grout areas.

Don'ts:

- Avoid acidic cleaners, as they can erode the grout
- Do not use brushes or tools with metal bristles or stainless steel to clean the grout, as they can cause erosion
- Never mix chemicals or use them other than as instructed by the manufacturer.

If the floor is a smooth VCT and an automatic scrubber has been used, the machine's vacuum system should ensure that the floor dries fairly quickly.

When an autoscrubber has not been used or if the floor has large grout areas, drying time may be slower.

In addition to presenting safety issues, the damp areas of the floor can become breeding grounds for bacteria.

To avoid this, use a wet/dry vacuum system.

This helps extract not only moisture, but also any remaining contaminants or chemical residue left behind.

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