Smart Shopping for Home Furnishings

Selecting Vinyl Flooring

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Shopping for vinyl? There are many different varieties of vinyl. To get a good quality vinyl, you should be able to answer these questions.

- WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?
- WHAT QUALITY FEATURES DO I LOOK FOR?
- HOW MUCH DO I NEED?
- WHAT'S THE CONDITION OF THE UNDERSURFACE?
- DO I NEED A SPECIAL ADHESIVE?
- WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?
- WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?

There are many different types of vinyl on the market. Vinyl can be classified into sheets or tiles.

Vinyl Sheets. Vinyl sheets come in basically two types: the ***inlaid*** and the ***printed vinyl***. Inlaid vinyl sheets are more expensive and heavier than regular printed vinyl. The reason for this is that vinyl is used throughout the thickness of the flooring. If the pattern is chipped or scratched, the damage is barely noticeable since the pattern extends through the thickness of the sheet. Because of the weight, solid vinyl sheets are not recommended to be installed by the do-it-yourselfer. Printed vinyl sheets are made by running a backing material through a printing machine where the pattern is applied. This pattern layer is then coated with several layers of clear vinyl or urethane, which is called the "wear layer" (see Figure 3.1).

Vinyl Tile. You can purchase vinyl tile in either composition or solid. Vinyl composition tile consists of several different materials and fillers that are mixed in a large vat. Color is added to the vat when it is needed to create the particular pattern. Additional texture, colors, and a wear layer may be added to the top surface after the tiles are set. A vinyl composition tile does not have the same pattern on both sides. This is the best way to tell the difference between vinyl composition and solid vinyl.

The solid vinyl tile will have the same color pattern on both sides of the tile. This is because the color pattern goes through the whole tile to the back. Solid vinyls are just what the term implies, vinyl without any fillers.

WHAT QUALITY FEATURES DO I LOOK FOR?

There are several quality features found in vinyl that are important to the consumer. All features may not be found in both sheet and tile goods, which is explained in the following paragraphs. Quality features for vinyl include: “nowax surfaces,” degree of gloss and surface texture, recovery capabilities, whether sunlight protected, underfoot comfort, and the thickness of the top wear layer.

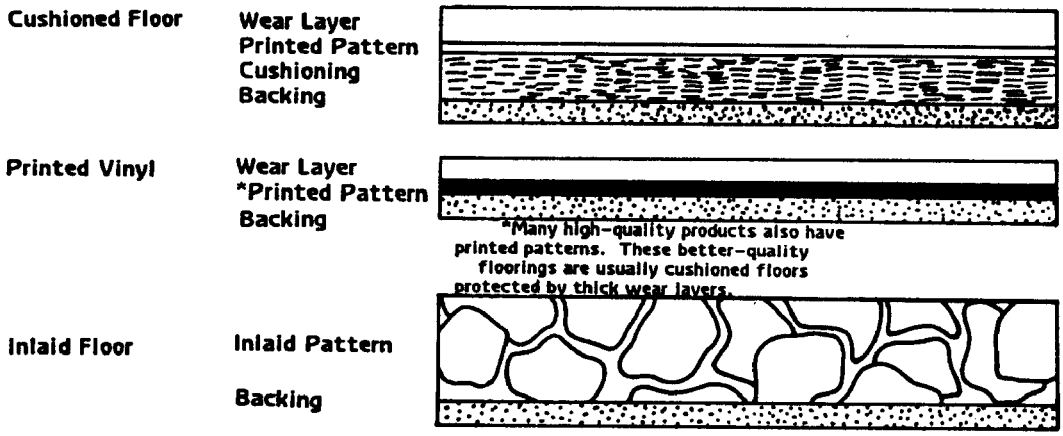

Figure 3.1. Vinyl Flooring

No-wax Surfaces. You can either purchase “no-wax” or “wax” vinyl surfaces. Much of what is sold today is “no-wax.” The “no-wax” surfaces save cleaning time because the purchaser does not have to wax the floor since the floor shines without waxing. One problem with this is that even the best “no-wax” finishes eventually lose their shine and have to be restored by buffing or recoating the “no-wax” finish. What manufacturers recommend is that the consumer apply a new thin coat of the “no-wax” material over the surface where the shine has disappeared. This recoating should not be applied over the entire floor or the floor will get a buildup of the material where the “no-wax” surface has not worn down.

Most manufacturers have a patent on their “no-wax” surface. These manufacturers may use the same finish name, but the material may still be different in chemical percentages. That is why it is a good idea to use the manufacturer’s recommended recoating material for your floor.

Just like the wear layer, the “no-wax” surfaces consist of either clear urethane or vinyl. The urethane finish is harder, more expensive, and usually lasts longer than the vinyl finish. A urethane finish provides a higher gloss and is more popular today because of the gloss.

Degree of Gloss and Surface Texture. You can find vinyl sheets and tile in a high-gloss or a low-gloss finish with different surface textures. A high-gloss finish with little surface texture tends to dull in high traffic areas and also shows irregularities in the floor surface. If you are going to install the floor in an area where the finish might be scratched, buy a low-gloss finish with texture. A textured surface with a low-gloss finish does not magnify the scratches like a high-gloss finish with little surface texture.

Recovery Capabilities. Sometimes vinyl will not recover from indentation caused by momentary impact or concentrated loads remaining on the floor for long periods of time. There are recommended load limit values available from the manufacturer to aid you in the

selection of vinyl and the proper sized floor protectors for furniture and appliances. These floor protectors prevent permanent indentation from long-period loads. Check indentation caused by momentary impact by pushing into the vinyl sample with the object. If the vinyl recovers to its original surface, it should recover from various objects laid on your floor.

Sunlight Protected. Almost all flooring shows some damage when exposed to direct sunlight. Exposure to strong sunlight may cause fading, blistering, and brittleness. Neutral colors such as grays and tans offer the best resistance to fading. Pastels, especially yellows, reds, and pinks, give the poorest performance in retaining color. Ask if there is a warranty against fading from sunlight.

Underfoot Comfort. The amount of cushioning is very important in floor areas where prolonged walking or standing takes place. A cushiony backing is more comfortable to walk or stand on for long periods of time than a noncushioned vinyl.

Solid and composition tiles do not have a cushion backing because the cushion comes within the thickness of the tiles. Test the underfoot comfort by laying the vinyl material on a hard surface and stand on the vinyl for at least 5 minutes. Does it feel too hard?

The printed vinyl and solid vinyl sheets may have a fiberglass backing, a backing consisting of a mixture of various materials, or a foam cushion backing. The fiberglass has a good non-tear quality and adheres to the floor quite well. The foam cushioning provides a soft surface to stand on and comes in various thicknesses.

Thickness of Wear Layer. The key to a long-wearing vinyl is the thickness of the wear layer. There are some thin wear layers that can be easily dented or gouged and worn through in high traffic areas. The thicker the wear layer, the longer the flooring will not show damage. The wear layer should be at least 10 mils thick to provide good durability. Ten mils is the minimum FHA requirement. The thickest wear layer is around 30 mils. The thicker the wear layer, the more expensive the vinyl. Manufacturers indicate that 1 mil of wear layer will last a family of four one year. To find out the thickness of the wear layer, ask the sales clerk if you could see the specification sheet or the manufacturer's catalog.

HOW MUCH DO I NEED?

To figure how much vinyl you need, multiply the width by the length of the room in feet to get the square footage of the room. Tiles are sold by the box and generally come in one foot square tiles. Most boxes contain approximately 45 square feet of tile.

Sheet vinyl is available in 6, 9, or 12 foot wide sheets and solid vinyl comes in 6 foot wide sheets. Depending on the width of your room, the additional vinyl needed for pattern matching, and the width of the vinyl sheets, you may have to purchase extra materials.

WHAT'S THE CONDITION OF THE UNDERSURFACE?

The condition of the undersurface determines the performance of vinyl flooring. If your subfloor is in poor condition, use special flexible flooring that covers up irregularities and allows easy installation over any subfloor without special underlay and extensive subfloor preparation.

Most subfloors need some special preparation before putting vinyl flooring down. The thinner the floor materials, the greater the chances of floor irregularities pushing through the vinyl.

Always follow manufacturer's instructions concerning the proper adhesive and method of installation.

Permit concrete to dry for several months with good ventilation before installing vinyl flooring. Concrete curing compounds are used to decrease concrete drying time, which may interfere with the bonding of the flooring adhesive.

If you are going to lay vinyl over a particle board floor, it is best to use sheet vinyl rather than tile. This is because wood expands and contracts causing the vinyl tile seams to spread.

Solid vinyl can be installed on concrete and on wood in good condition and properly prepared. Plywood or felt paper lining is recommended for installations over wood. With alkaline resistant adhesives, solid vinyl can be installed over concrete.

Vinyl should never be laid directly over bare plywood or particle board without some kind of sealer between the tile and the wood. The reason for this is that the plywood or particle board absorbs the moisture from the adhesive, leaving a dry clay. In about a years time, the vinyl laid over the plywood or particle board comes loose. The way to install vinyl flooring over plywood or particle board is either first to seal the particle board or plywood with shellac or separate the particle board from the vinyl by first pasting tar paper down to the particle board and then laying the vinyl.

DO I NEED A SPECIAL ADHESIVE?

The life and serviceability of any vinyl flooring installation depends greatly upon the selection of the proper adhesive. The adhesive bond should be strong enough to prevent the separation of the vinyl from the subfloor, yet not so strong that the flooring cannot be removed when new flooring is put down.

Make sure you use the correct adhesive. Each manufacturer recommends the type of adhesive and seam sealer that should be used with its flooring. If you do not use the correct adhesive, you may get a discoloration of the vinyl caused by the adhesive bleeding through the vinyl at the seams. Manufacturers leave out certain products in their adhesives so their vinyl is not discolored. Ask the sales clerk which adhesive and seam sealer you should use.

WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?

On the store vinyl samples you will probably find the manufacturer’s name and the style name or number. Check the back of the vinyl that the installer is going to put into your home to see if it is the same manufacturer as the sample you selected.

The only labeling information you will find for tile is on the tile box. The manufacturer's name, the pattern number, and the run number are found on or in the tile box. Generally, the tile itself does not have any labeling.

WHAT’S ON THE WARRANTY?

Most of the warranties are limited, meaning prorated. Generally, this is not the type of warranty for which you have to fill out a card and send it to the manufacturer. The retailer stamps the written warranty with the date of purchase and if anything goes wrong, you take the stamped warranty to the retailer. Then the retailer handles the complaint. If you have lost your warranty, but have the date of purchase or a sales slip, the retailer should be able to handle your complaint. Remember that warranties only cover manufacturer’s defects and dealers and installers are responsible for workmanship.

If you are not given a written warranty or adequate information from the retailer concerning the warranty, call the manufacturer to ask questions. Most large manufacturers have toll-free numbers the consumer can call for information. When you buy something, always ask for the manufacturer's name, how to care for the product, and the toll-free information telephone number.

Defects found on vinyl flooring generally consist of misprinted patterns or colors. The pattern may be printed slightly off, which does not affect the wear but affects the appearance of the flooring. Do not blame a pattern for being crooked when, in fact, your walls are not straight. Some other defects found on vinyl flooring are that the color is printed off, a portion of the “wear layer” may be missing, or the “wear layer” has a bubble because of a malfunction of the machinery.

✔ Quality Checklist

After each question, answer with a yes* or no.

1. If purchasing tile, did you check to see if it is solid or vinyl composition?
2. Is the surface “no-wax,” which makes it easy to maintain?
3. Is the surface dull or textured to minimize visible scratches?
4. How well does the floor recover from indentation?
5. Is there a warranty against fading from sunlight?
6. Did you ask for a copy of the manufacturer’s specification sheet to check the thickness of the wear layer?
7. Did you figure how much vinyl will be required to cover your floor?
8. Did you check the amount of cushioning by standing on the vinyl over a hard surface?
9. Did you make sure that your subfloor is in the proper condition?
10. Did you check to make sure that you are going to use the proper adhesive for your particular conditions and materials?
11. Did you read all the labels?
12. Did you read the warranty?
13. Did you get a copy of the warranty?

* If you answered all these questions with a yes, you can be assured of getting a high-quality vinyl flooring.

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