HOUSING

Care of furniture surfaces no. 9.528

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Quick Facts...

Most modern surfaces and finishes do not require pampering but they can be damaged if neglected or treated roughly.

Dust removal helps prevent scratches and build-up of soil on furniture.

Cleaning and polishing or waxing needs to be done only once or twice a year, with dusting and buffing between coats enough to keep surfaces clean.

Different furniture finishes require specific cleaning methods and surface repairs.

Furniture that receives reasonably careful use and is kept clean will remain attractive for many years. Most modern finishes and plastic surfaces do not require pampering, but they can be scratched, dented or chipped if neglected or treated roughly.

Granted, a certain amount of damage is bound to occur, but much can be avoided by using precautions such as covering bottoms of rough objects with felt and promptly wiping up spilled liquids. Always completely cover tables used by children for playing with paint, clay and marking pencils, because even plastic surfaces can be permanently stained. Avoid using rubber or plastic mats on wood finishes unless specified as safe. These will sometimes stain or soften the finish.

Warping, cracking, fading or wood discoloration, loose joints and veneer often are results of poor environment caused by constant exposure to sunlight and extremes in temperature and humidity. Storage in hot, uninsulated attics dries out wood and loosens joints. Damp areas cause wood to swell and encourage mildew. Cracking and checking may be due to the environment, thickness of the finish, chemicals in the finish, or age. Since very dry indoor conditions during the winter also can dry out furniture, a humidifier may be worthwhile.

In recent years the furniture industry has turned to a variety of technical innovations in order to conserve resources and provide design variety in furniture in the lower price brackets. Among these are very thin veneers — 1/36 inch or thinner, embossed wood grain patterns, wood grain printed directly on wood and plastic parts that resemble carved moldings. Grain patterns and plastic parts may be handled so skillfully that they are difficult for most people to detect. The surfaces are coated with a durable finish that will withstand routine dusting, cleaning and polishing. However, the use of abrasives (steel wool or sandpaper) may damage the surface and remove printed patterns. Pieces with printed grain patterns and plastic parts cannot be refinished. Touch up damaged areas with paint or a brown marking pen.

Always follow manufacturer instructions for care and cleaning of furniture surfaces. If instructions are not provided, request them from the store or the manufacturer, preferably before purchase.

Caution: Mineral spirits, waxes and oils can start fire by spontaneous combustion. Therefore, dispose of all rags and steel wool in an air-tight metal container--preferably out of doors.

Dusting

Dust removal helps prevent scratches and buildup of soil on furniture. You'll need nothing more than a clean, lint-free cloth **slightly** dampened with water. A dampened cloth picks up dust rather than merely pushing it around. Commercial dusting aids (available in liquid and spray form) also are effective.

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Many dusting aids contain silicone that holds dust to the cloth and temporarily gives a high luster. Some eventually leave a film that usually can be removed by a cleaning wax or mineral spirits.

Cleaning and Reviving Finishes

Unless you live in an area having a great deal of atmospheric soil, cleaning and polishing or waxing will need to be done only once or twice a year. Dusting and buffing betwcen coats will keep surfaces clean and attractive. For appearance, the surfaces of furniture receiving constant or hard use may need waxing more often.

Clean more frequently if the surface becomes dull or streaked. This can be caused by a buildup of cleaning products and soil, or body oil and heating fumes, both of which may soften some types of finishes.

Clean by using one or more of the following— detergent and water; mineral spirits, paint thinner or turpentine; cleaning wax; and/or steel wool.

Use such solvents as mineral spirits for removing oily soil and wax. Use water for other types of soil. Steel wool (3/0 or 4/0) removes stubborn soil and stains and smooths rough surfaces.

Boiled linseed oil is used both as a polish and as a furniture finish. Purchase **boiled** linseed oil. Do not boil raw linseed oil at home. This is dangerous and will not result in the same product. Both linseed oil and tung oil are drying oils that harden when exposed to air. As such, they seal the wood and make it resistant to stains. (Non-drying oils such as mineral oil never should be used as wood finishes.)

Oil Finishes and Penetrating Sealers

A damp cloth removes most soil, but the surface can be washed with detergent and water if necessary. Oily soil and wax can be removed with mineral spirits. After an oil-rubbed finish has been cleaned it can be restored with a coat of oil recommended by the manufacturer, boiled linseed oil, tung oil or a commercially prepared penetrating oil finish.

Wood will absorb tung or linseed oil faster if the oil has been heated in a double boiler and/or diluted with about l/3 **mineral spirits** (1 part mineral spirits to 3 parts tung or linseed oil). Allow to soak into the surface for a few minutes, then remove all excess by buffing hard with a clean cloth. (Oil left on the surface may become sticky.) The more buffing, the more polished the surface.

A fresh coat of oil can be applied any time the wood begins to look dull. However, if wax has been used, it must be removed first. Although wax can be used on most oil-finished pieces, it is not necessary. Oily polishes should not be used.

Varnish and Lacquer Finishes

Remove soil and fingerprints by rubbing with a damp cloth followed by rubbing with a clean dry cloth. Remove stubborn soil with a mild detergent (the kind recommended for dishes or hand laundry) and water. Use a clean sponge or soft cloth. Wash, rinse and dry only a small area at a time. Work fast and avoid excess water, especially around joints.

Many waxes and polishes also act as cleaning agents if properly applied. (See section on waxes and polishes.) Occasional buffing should keep waxed surfaces in condition.

If excess wax has accumulated or oily polish has been used, remove with a cloth dampened with mineral spirits or synthetic turpentine. (Natural turpentine may leave a sticky residue.) Should the furniture be badly soiled due to neglect, use very fine 3/0 or 4/0 steel wool instead of a cloth and rub with the grain of the wood. As some finishes can be damaged by prolonged contact with mineral spirits, clean small areas at a time. Wipe each area with a clean cloth before going on to the next. Discard steel wool as it becomes soiled.

An old cleanser-conditioner recipe for cleaning and polishing antiques or for reviving cloudy varnished or lacquered finishes follows:

• Combine 1 teaspoon mineral spirits and 3 teaspoons boiled linseed oil. Pour mixture into one cup of hot water. **Do not stir.** With a clean cloth, skim along warmed oily layer floating on surface of hot water. Do not dip into water. Apply to surface and rub small area at a time. Discard mixture in cup when cold. **Do not reheat**. It is flammable and will become gummy.

For greater cleaning power use more solvent—3 parts mineral spirits to one part boiled linseed oil. Use 4/0 steel wool instead of a cloth, especially on rough surfaces. Rub in direction of wood grain. Wipe cleaned surface with damp cloth. Polish with soft, dry cloth. An alternative cleanser conditioner is as follows:

• Using a clean cloth, rub furniture with a solution made from equal parts of turpentine, linseed oil and vinegar. Buff hard with a clean lint-free cloth until excess solution is removed and a sheen appears.

Painted Surfaces

The best routine care for painted pieces is dusting with a water-dampened cloth. When very soiled, wash with detergent and water. If you plan to use wax, apply it only once or twice a year and be sure it is the **white cream** variety. Other waxes may discolor light painted surfaces. Hand rubbing with any polishes or cleaners may remove painted decorations or antique finishes.

Although painted surfaces can be carefully touched up with matching paint, the results may look patched. Whenever possible try to remove spots and scurf marks by washing or cleaning with mineral spirits. Sanding with even a fine abrasive may change the luster of the sanded spot, especially if the finish has been antiqued. If extensive damage has been done, the piece will need repainting. A very old piece with its original finish should not be repainted or refinished. By doing so you remove the indications of its authenticity and thereby destroy its antique value.

Shellac Finishes

A suprising number of old furniture pieces still may be finished with shellac. Much of this was probably furniture refinished at home. However, in the 19th century and early 20th century a high gloss finish known as French Polish, which used shellac, was considered highly desirable.

Water and a damp environment will make shellac sticky. If you have an old piece, test the finish in an inconspicuous spot with alcohol. If the alcohol removes the finish, the finish is shellac. Clean it only with a solution made from equal parts of boiled linseed oil and mineral spirits, or a cleaning/polishing wax meant for furniture. Use 3/0 or 410 steel wool to remove stubborn soil and to smooth roughened surfaces. If the finish is in poor condition, use alcohol for partial or complete removal.

Laminated Plastics

High pressure laminates are made from 8 to 10 layers of resin-treated paper turned into a tough surfacing material by heat and pressure. The top layer is melamine plastic. The second layer is a sheet on which a plain color or a pattern is printed.

Laminates frequently are used on tops of tables and chests of drawers, countertops and, sometimes, whole pieces of furniture. Some resemble wood so well that the consumer may not know the difference. While this material is not affected by water and other substances that affect wood, it can be damaged by rough use. Protect laminated plastics from sharp blows, hot serving dishes and sharp utensils. Food will not damage the surface, but such liquids as juices and ink may stain. Highly polished surfaces will show more wear than those with a softer texture and appearance. Abrasive cleansing powders will dull a glossy surface

permanently, making it susceptible to staining. Fine scratches, a result of continual use over a period of time, will be noticeable.

General care of laminates is strictly detergent and water. For stubborn stains, use a small amount of baking soda applied with a damp cloth. Cream wax, spray wax or auto wax will improve the appearance of worn surfaces.

Waxes and Polishes

Waxes and polishes maintain the appearance of furniture by giving it a high gloss or low luster depending on the product used. They also give varying degrees of water repellency to the surface, thereby minimizing the danger of staining from spilled liquids. Some finishes, of course, are designed to be heat, moisture- and alcohol-resistant and are in need of less protection.

Another feature of many waxes and polishes is their cleaning power. Solvents help remove old wax and oily soil when a new coat is rubbed on. Products containing the most solvent (petroleum distillates) are likely to have the greatest cleaning power. Consequently, there is little chance of buildup of soiled wax if these products are applied according to directions.

Advice concerning the choice of a wax or polish varies. Hard waxes such as carnauba are often recommended for maintaining antiques. Properly applied they give a hard dry finish that will not collect dust. Some products labeled “polish” have a wax base. Some do not.

Many experts frown upon oily polishes and soft waxes, such as beeswax. They feel that soft wax, especially if too generously applied, may not harden and will collect soil. The same can be said about many oily polishes that are not completely buffed off.

Luster also is a consideration. Products containing silicones will produce a high gloss and good water repellency. For good protection with somewhat less gloss, use paste wax. Cream waxes and polishes generally give a satin sheen unless the label says otherwise. Some, like paste wax, require buffing. Others take considerably less effort. Methods of application vary and should be carefully followed.

You will have little way of knowing what the product you buy contains. Silicones are seldom mentioned, however, some labels do state that the product does not contain silicone. You will find such information as “gives a high gloss,” “contains oil,” “does not leave a haze” or “contains hard wax.” Most will tell you the surfaces on which the product can be used, along with directions for use. Read carefully and compare products until you find one to meet your needs.

Always pretest any new product on an inconspicuous part of the furniture before using it on the whole piece. If the product you’ve been using eventually leaves an oily film or haze or produces too high a gloss, remove it and switch to another. Cloudy or streaked surfaces also may be caused by improper application of cleaning product--too heavily applied, not enough rubbed off; greasy film from cooking and heating fumes; or use of an oil-base product on a waxed surface or vice-versa.

Spot Removal and Minor Repairs

Repairs are made with one or more materials--each with a different function. Solvents will soften various substances so that they can he wiped off. In some cases solvents eliminate spots by softening and redistributing the finish. Abrasives such as pumice and steel wool remove spots by rubbing them off. Most supplies can be purchased at paint and hardware stores. Drug stores may carry pumice, spirits of camphor and oil of wintergreen.

Most oil-rubbed or penetrating seal finishes can be easily repaired. Touch up jobs on varnished, lacquered or painted surfaces are likely to appear patched. Have a professional repair extensive damage on these finishes. Badly damaged laminated plastics are impossible to repair. Prevention is the best treatment.

Oil Rubbed or Penetrating Seal Finishes

Most marks will disappear by rubbing with 3/0 steel wool dipped in a little linseed oil and turpentine. Rub off excess with a clean, dry cloth. If sanding is necessary, first remove wax with mineral spirits, then rub with a very fine abrasive paper such as 6/0 or 220. Restore the luster by rubbing on another coat of finish.

Be careful with abrasives. Some oil-finished furniture is first sealed with a thin coat of lacquer. If used too vigorously, abrasives may remove some of this coat. As a result, oil, when re-applied, may produce a different color effect in areas where the base coat is removed.

Black spots are caused by water. If the stain is not too deep, repeated hard rubbing with 4/0 steel wool and alcohol should remove it.

See "Varnishes, lacquer and other surface finishes" for removal of nail polish, wax, paint and burns.

Varnish, Lacquer and Other Surface Finishes

If spot removal changes the luster of a finish, rub the entire surface with a mixture of pumice or rottenstone mixed with boiled linseed oil. Rottenstone is finer and will give a higher polish. Always rub in the direction of the wood grain. Use the palm of your hand or a soft cloth. If mixture becomes sticky, add a few drops of mineral spirits. Finish by wiping off the mixture and buffing with a clean cloth. Oil should be almost completely buffed off. If wax is desired, wait for 48 hours.

Checking and small scratches. Dry heat, direct sunlight, sudden temperature changes, exposure to dampness and improper finishing may cause fine hairline cracks in a surface finish. This is called **checking**. Both scratched and checked surfaces can be at least partially restored by rubbing with a paste of pumice or rottenstone mixed with linseed oil. First remove all wax with mineral spirits. Then, using a soft cloth (or your hands) rub paste with the grain of the wood. Keep rubbing until marks disappear. Remove all excess oil with clean, absorbent cloths.

Small scratches may disappear with application of equal parts of boiled linseed oil and mineral spirits or turpentine, or by cleaning with the cleanser-conditioner. (See "Cleaning".) If the surface is not too badly scratched or checked, improve the appearance by applying paste wax or liquid cleaning-polishing wax with 3/0 steel wool. Should scratches need staining, use a little shoe polish, oil stain, or one of the colored waxes made for wood. Deep scratches, especially on some of the newer finishes, may be almost impossible to hide as they are resistant to staining.

White marks. Some of the causes of white marks are liquids containing alcohol (perfume, medicine, beverages), heat and water. Your success in removing such marks depends on the amount of damage and its cause. The following treatments may be helpful in minimizing or removing such marks.

• Many spots will disappear if rubbed with a solution made of equal parts of boiled linseed oil, turpentine and vinegar, or with a cleaning-polishing wax. If the mark is stubborn, rub with 3/0 or 4/0 steel wool instead of a cloth. Rub with the grain of the wood. Do not use steel wool on high gloss finishes.

• Rub spot lightly with a paste of powdered pumice or rottenstone and linseed oil.

• Spots on all finishes except lacquer can be treated with a cloth dampened with spirits of camphor, essence of peppermint or oil of wintergreen. Because these may make the surface tacky they should not be rubbed. When dry, you may need to smooth the roughened spot by rubbing with a paste of powdered pumice or rottenstone and linseed oil.

• Alcohol spots often respond to a quick exposure to ammonia. Rub lightly with a cloth dampened with water and a few drops of household ammonia.

Water-thinned paints. Wipe off with water. **Caution:** water will make shellac surfaces sticky.

Oil-based paints. If wet, wipe off with clean cloth. Remove residue with cloth dampened with mineral spirits, paint thinner or liquid furniture wax with a petroleum solvent base. Small dried spots can be gently scraped off with a knife. Remove the remaining paint with 3/0 steel wool or 6/0 abrasive paper. Rub sanded area with linseed oil if desired. As any abrasive may change the luster, you may need to rub the entire surface with pumice or rottenstone and oil.

Nail polish. Nail polish and polish remover will soften or remove a varnished or lacquered surface. If an accident has occurred, rub spot immediately with 3/0 steel wool dipped in liquid wax. In case the polish has already penetrated the surface, this treatment may remove some of the wood finish. If so, let the spot dry. Then remove the wax and try smoothing the surface with pumice and oil. If the surface is badly damaged, professional refinishing will be needed.

Candle wax. An ice cube will harden the wax enough so that excess can be chipped off with your fingernail. If necessary, scrape gently with a dull knife. Then rub with a cloth saturated with mineral spirits or liquid wax. The remaining candle wax also can be removed by placing a blotter on the spot and ironing over it with warm iron. **Caution:** heat may damage surface.

Laminated Plastics

Although not affected by water or most foods, laminated plastics can be permanently stained by some inks and marking pencils. Alcohol may remove some stains. Under no circumstances should steel wool or other abrasives be used.

Anything waxy or oily such as paint, candlewax or shoe polish comes off with mineral spirits or dry cleaning solvent. Remove water base paints with water. Small spots or paint or wax can be carefully chipped off. Use nail polish remover for nail polish.

Painted furniture--see **“Cleaning”.**

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