Grout Cleaning

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is cleaning grout so difficult?

Tile-and-grout floors have become quite popular over the years. Unfortunately, we have been told that these floors are virtually maintenance-free except for an occasional mopping, which is not the case.

The necessity of cleaning grout has frustrated many homeowners, builders and contractors. After all, the appearance of the grout directly reflects on the cleanliness of the floor as well as on the individual maintaining it.

Why is grout so hard to clean? Grout is a mixture of cement, water and differently sized aggregates. Because grout is a porous substance, microscopic pores allow dirt to become trapped below the surface, where regular mopping cannot remove it. Dirt continues to build up inside these pores, leaving the grout looking discolored and dirty.

What are my options for grout cleaning?

- **Floor finishes and waxes** can be used once a floor has been sealed. They keep dirt and contaminants away from the sealer, tile and grout joints. As time and traffic levels dictate, floor finishes and waxes are made to be removed and reapplied.

- **Neutral cleaners**, which have a pH of 7 (neutral), are neither acidic nor alkaline. Certain wetting agents and detergents within them emulsify grease and oils. Neutral cleaners are recommended for regular cleaning, as they will not affect tile or grout, and also can be used as general “all-purpose” cleaners.

- **Acids**, which have a pH less than 7, are available in various types. However, acids do not clean. For years, *muriatic acid* has been used and recommended as a cleaner. But in fact, muriatic acid is a dangerous acid that can destroy and discolor grout joints, tile work and surrounding finishes. It should only be used as a last measure and with great caution. *Phosphoric* and *sulfamic* acids are much more user-friendly and should be considered if an acid is necessary.
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It is a common misconception that vinegar can’t hurt the surface of glazed tile or grout. Yet vinegar (with a pH level of 3.3) actually has a higher level of acidic level than rainwater (with a pH level of 5.3). In fact, many common acids – such as fruit juices, wines and soft drinks – can damage marble and the glaze of various glazed tiles. In general, acid spills should be avoided; if an acid spill occurs, immediately wipe it up to prevent or minimize damage to the tile’s glaze or polish.

- **Citric solvents** have appeared in the marketplace recently as an alternative to petroleum solvents for removing synthetic coatings and films. These user-friendly, citrus-based solvents are able to remove grease, tar, paint, crayon, ink, heel marks, lipstick and epoxy films.

What if my grout needs more than cleaning?

Sometimes grout joints become so badly stained or blotchy, no amount of cleaning will restore them to the desired color. In these cases, it was once necessary to remove and replace grout joints to restore their appeal. This procedure includes mechanically grinding and removing at least 2/3 of the depth of the grout, then re-grouting. Not only is this method a tedious and dusty way to restore grout joints, often it is impossible to avoid damaging the tile in the process.

Today, however, colored sealers are available as an alternative to removing grout. Though using colored sealers may be labor-intensive, it is more controlled than replacing grout joints. Plus, colored sealers create a permanent joint color, seal the joints from contaminants and are long-lasting. Most colored sealers include straightforward application instructions and come in a wide variety of colors.

Because tile grout is porous, it is vulnerable to staining if it is not sealed. Therefore, to reduce the frequency of grout maintenance, use a water-based grout sealer. Sealing your grout will make it stain-resistant and will simplify the maintenance of your interior and exterior installations.
What else should I know about sealers?

- Using a sealer on a MAPEI cement-based grout is not a requirement, but it can certainly help increase the longevity of the grout. The grout’s high degree of porosity allows fluids and dirt to be absorbed, resulting in stained or dingy-looking grout. Applying a sealer will help fill the pore structure and help keep the grout from absorbing stains and foreign materials. 
  
  *Note: Do not seal an epoxy grout. Once cured, epoxy grout is nonabsorbent (impervious) and will not absorb the grout sealer.*

- Use a silicone sealer on MAPEI’s Ultracolor® grout. Due to its low porosity and hardness, a regular sealer will not penetrate it.

- You can apply a breathable sealer 24 hours after applying MAPEI’s Keracolor™ S or Keracolor U grout. For usage details and recommendations on other types of sealers, contact your local sealer manufacturer.

- Applied grout sealers offer stain resistance but not stainproofing. Heavy traffic and repeated cleanings may reduce the stain-resistant quality of grout seals. A sealer should be reapplied only per the manufacturer’s directions.

- To test a sealer’s effectiveness, place several drops of clean water on the suspect grout. If water consequently beads up on the grout, the sealer is doing its job.

Select MAPEI grouts and caulks now contain BioBlock™, a powerful antimicrobial ingredient that inhibits growth of odor- and stain-causing mold, mildew and bacteria. BioBlock has been added to Keracolor S sanded and Keracolor U unsanded grouts, Ultracolor grout, and Keracaulk™ S sanded and Keracaulk U unsanded caulks.