

Caring for Ceramic Tile Surfaces

Sealing

A sealer is used to protect the surface of *unglazed* ceramic tiles and grout joints from stains and to provide ease in installation and continued clean-up. There is a very distinct difference between a sealer and a surface coating. Surface coatings (waxes or lacquers) put a thin coat on the surface. After this coat has worn off there is no protection left. When freshly applied and dry these coatings can appear cloudy and discolor the tile. Some are agents for trapping and holding dirt causing the surface to need to be stripped to clean it. The coating will put a glossy finish to the tiles, but will not make them free of maintenance. In fact, the opposite is true. The coating will need to be stripped and reapplied frequently to maintain the appearance of the ceramic tile.

Use a sealer that will penetrate the surface as much as the porosity of the tile and surface condition will allow. These must be wiped off the tile prior to drying to avoid leaving a film on the surface. Ask your tile installer to select the sealer based on your individual needs.

When to use a Sealer

When installing unglazed tile, a sealer should be considered before it is installed or at least prior to grouting the installation. A sealer will help to prevent construction materials from staining the tile. In addition, it will aid in easier clean-up of the grout residue left after grouting. Some installers use a grout release to provide this ease in cleaning but some can present problems. They can inhibit the grout from bonding to the underlying surface or edges of each tile. This bond is important to the strength of the tile installation.

Manufacturers of *glazed* tiles do not typically recommend using sealers because it isn't necessary (see [Porcelain vs. Ceramic Tile](#)). In rare cases where the glaze is crazed (finely pitted surface) a sealer may be justified.

After the job is finished and cleaned the grout joints should be sealed. Follow manufacturer's instructions. If the tile is glazed, wipe clean prior to drying.

Cleaning and Maintenance

After it is properly sealed, the tile job will be easy to clean and maintain. If it wasn't sealed and is now stained, consult a cleaning professional to have the stains removed. Depending on the nature of the stain cleaning may be done with standard methods and materials or may require specialized stain removers. For unglazed ceramic tile, a light acid may be required (such as to remove alkaline films); the only materials proven to be successful without harming the grout and tile surfaces are sulfamic or phosphoric acids in proper proportions. Do not use these as a general cleaner. They are meant to be used only in removing specific substances.

Sealed tile cleans best with ph neutral soap or synthetic detergent based cleansers. These cleaning agents do *not* include bleaches or acids and are safe to use. Soap based cleaners should be specifically suited for ceramic tile. Some soap based cleaners leave soap scum behind which makes it more difficult to clean. Make sure that you rinse the area thoroughly after a light scrub with a non-metallic brush or pad.

Regular cleaning should be done weekly to remove built up dirt in a commercial area once a month in a residential installation or as needed.