Home Repair Resource center

HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

OFF WITH THE OLD

Removing old wall and floor coverings – for do-it-yourself repairs

Over the years, most homeowners seek to improve the look of their house by installing new wall coverings and flooring materials. Before you put on the new material, however, you may have a hard time getting the old, deteriorated covering off the wall or floor surface first. Here are a few hints to make such jobs easier.

FLOOR TILE AND SHEET FLOORING

You can take up old floor tile or sheet flooring with a chisel-edged scraper. The most difficult part is usually getting the old adhesive off the floor surface. A floor scraper made for this purpose works best for this job, or you can use an ice chipper (a tool that looks like a straightened-out garden hoe) – but, in either case, you'll need a fair amount of elbow grease. For particularly stubborn adhesives, use a heat gun to soften the material before removing it with the scraper.

ASBESTOS FLOORING

Don't try to remove, sand, or level asbestos flooring or its backing; instead, install new floor covering over it.

CARPETING AND PADDING

For carpeting and its foam padding, use a utility knife to cut the materials into smaller strips that you can handle more easily. To remove the staples used to tack the padding into the hardwood flooring, a brad puller – a v-shaped "mini crowbar" with a screwdriver handle – works best.

Sometimes, the foam padding will have become embedded into the varnish. The best way to remove it is to scrape it off with a floor scraper, ice chipper or a straight-bladed paint scraper, being careful not to scar the hardwood floor beneath. In some cases, paint thinner will remove part of the residue, but it is highly flammable – and, you'll definitely need to refinish the hardwood flooring afterwards.

WALLPAPER

Wallpaper can be particularly difficult to get off your walls, especially if there are multiple layers or if the old paper has been painted over. A steamer will sometimes work wonders, but with some papers or adhesives, it may not accomplish much of anything.

Chemical removers are another option, but with foil, vinyl, or vinyl-covered wall coverings, you'll need to perforate the material to allow the chemicals or steam to get behind it and work on the adhesive. Use a perforating tool, such as Zinsser's PaperTiger™ (see illustration), to puncture the paper without scarring the plaster wall beneath it.



Zinsser's PaperTiger™ perforating tool

OLD PLASTER REPAIRS

Residue from old, poorly done plaster repairs can be smoothed out with a pole sander, which has a swivel-head that holds a piece of sanding screen. You'll need to exert some physical effort and clean up all the plaster dust that is produced. For this reason, you may choose to use an electric sander made especially for this purpose; a shroud surrounds the sanding head and controls the plaster dust so it is sucked into an attached power vacuum, reducing the amount of cleanup needed later. (Don't use a regular electric sander for this job, because plaster dust will ruin its motor.)

LEAD-BASED PAINT

If the plaster is covered with layers of old paint, make sure you take precautions to prevent contamination from leaded paint dust (see separate handout on "Controlling Lead-Based Paint during Your Paint Repair Project").

CUTTING INTO WALLS AND FLOORS

If you need to cut into existing walls or floors, a reciprocating saw (such as Milwaukee Tool's "Sawzall"™) can be equipped with a blade that will cut through nail-embedded wood or plaster. This tool makes removing old built-in cabinets easier, as well.

CLEANING UP

Cleaning up debris as you go along will make your job site safer and less likely to damage any new material you apply. Wash down walls and floors with warm water and TSP (trisodium phosphate), a detergent that you can purchase at most hardware and building supply stores. Pick up chunks of plaster or other large debris with a stiff push broom and a snow shovel. Heavy plastic refuse bags (3 mils or better) that will withstand sharp pieces and a lot of weight are available at builders' supply stores and well worth the extra cost.

SAVE ON CONTRACTOR COSTS

Even if you are using a contractor to install your new wall or floor covering, removing the old materials yourself may allow you to negotiate a lower price. Just give yourself enough time to do the job properly.

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Home Repair Resource Center empowers homeowners to maintain their homes for sustainable and diverse communities.

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