

Ask

Izzy



Q: How do you repair or refinish cork flooring?

A: Before refinishing a cork floor, three questions need to be answered.

1. What type of finish is on the floor? Most cork sold in the US over the past 10 – 15 years or so has a factory applied urethane coating. Older floors may have a wax finish and there are also some “hybrid” cork products with a vinyl back and a clear vinyl wearlayer. It is important to know what you have before you do anything. The urethane products are refinished using a “screen and recoat” method, which I’ll explain in just a bit. The waxed products can be cleaned up with steel wool and waxed again with a product like Johnson’s “Traffic” Wax. The Vinyl wearlayer types are treated pretty much like a vinyl floor, except go easy on the amount of water you use on the floor. Get the floor good and clean and use a good quality commercial vinyl floor finish that is made for a pure vinyl surface.
2. Assuming you know that the floor is a urethane, the next thing to look at is how much of the original urethane is still on the floor. Ideally, a cork floor, just like a urethane finish wood floor, should not be allowed to get worn to the point where you are down to the bare floor. If there is still urethane on the floor, a simple “screen and recoat” will place additional urethane on the existing urethane. Run a fine sanding screen (180-220) over the floor with a buffing machine, tack rag the floor to remove all the dust, and apply one or two coats of a urethane coating that is flexible enough for a cork floor, such as BonaKemi “Traffic”. (Yes, same name as the wax from Johnson). If you ask an experienced wood refinisher to do a “screen and recoat” he should know what you mean.
3. If the floor is badly worn, then you need to ascertain whether you are dealing with a homogeneous cork floor or a veneer. If it is a veneer, you need to very carefully screen the floor just enough to remove the finish and clean up the surface but not enough that you go through the

veneer. If you are too aggressive, you’ll go through the veneer and ruin the floor. Compared to engineered wood floors, the top veneer of a cork floor is much thinner, so you need to be very careful. On the other hand, if you are dealing with a homogeneous cork floor, it is not nearly as critical. Screen or lightly sand the floor down to bare cork. In either veneer or homogeneous cork, once you are down to bare cork, stain it or apply a sealer, and then apply at least three coats of urethane. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for the proper drying time between coats.

The best way to avoid the necessity of refinishing a urethane cork floor is to take good care of them from the time they are installed. In heavy traffic, the best way to do this is to screen and recoat the floor when it is brand new. This not only adds an additional protective coating, but had the added advantage of eliminating any high spots or ledging at the edges of the tile, and also helps to seal the edges so as to protect the floor from liquid spills and traffic. They can also be maintained with conventional floor finishes. Keeping the floor clean (damp mop only, not wet mopping) and using preventative maintenance measures (floor mats, chair protectors, etc) will go a long way towards keeping any floor covering looking good for a long time.

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