



Housekeeping

by Stan Zimmer

Floor grout cleaning

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Seasoned executive housekeepers know well that one of the toughest jobs associated with their specialization is the task of maintaining the grouting in a hotel's marble, granite, or ceramic floor surface. It is easy for guests to observe the difference in grouting by comparing grout lines up against a wall with those in more heavily-trafficked areas. Unlike the stone surface, grout lines are recessed, are more porous, have a tendency to discolor, and are more susceptible to residue buildup.

What makes it look dirty?

What contributes to or causes the disparity in color and texture of grout lines? This question is not that simple to answer. More than likely it is the result of a variety of misdirected efforts by the housekeeping department's floor technician to rectify the grout's dirty appearance coupled with the application of inappropriate products and/or the use of wrong equipment. Potential factors contributing to the dirty look of grout lines include:

- The use of daily cleansers that can't float the dirt and grime out of the more porous grout.
- The use of cleansers that contain detergents that resettle in lower grout joints and deposit some of the dirt with each cleaning
- Periodic waxing, which results in the excess buildup of wax residues in the grouting.
- The past use of "grout sealers" that contain silicone. Silicone-based sealers can trap and weld dirt and grease into the silicones that are not bound to the grouting.
- Not using the proper equipment to clean the grout lines. The cleaning implement must be able to agitate *into* the grout joints to be effective.
- The past use of acidic grout cleansers that make the grouting more porous and easier to re-soil. Remember, acids don't clean — they etch!

Getting started

Before attempting to clean the grout properly, the housekeeping manager and floor technician need to determine what previous steps have been taken to treat the grout. Consider these questions before proceeding:

- Does the grout have a "topical" sealer or wax that needs to be removed?
- Has the grout been previously treated with a silicone-based sealer?
- Does the flooring surface itself have a sealer or wax on it?
- What shape in the grout itself in? Are there inconsistent colorations, cracks, or missing grout?
- What cleansers have been used previously to clean the floor?

The most common frustration when cleaning floor grout is the presence of some sort of sealer. This can be a source of frustration when efforts are made to remove this unsightly problem. Be prepared to use a variety of stripping agents at different dilution levels to remove the problem coating.

Cleaning the grout

In order to clean floor grout effectively, two different chemicals are needed. Using a special nonacidic cleanser that can not only break down the waxes, oil and dirt but that can float the contaminants to the surface will be necessary. The final rinse can be accomplished using a special neutral pH cleanser that has exceptional floating capabilities. Important, too, is that the neutral cleanser will not leave any residue, like typical citrus-based cleansers tend to leave. For both marble and nonmarble floors, follow these steps:

1. Mix a solution of acrylic stripping/deep cleaning agent according to the label directions.

2. Apply the stripping/deep cleaning agent to the grout using either a mop or a spray mister. It is important to saturate the grout joints with the stripping agent. Allow the grout joints to soak for two to five minutes. Scrub with a nylon bristle brush or a Palmyra deck brush.
3. Vacuum up the stripping agent with a wet-vacuum or sponge mop the area dry.
4. Rinse the grout joints and floor surface with clean water. Again, remove moisture with a wet-vacuum.
5. If necessary, repeat steps one to four with a stronger solution of acrylic stripping/deep cleaning agent.
6. Prepare a rinse mixture by diluting a special neutral pH cleanser that will float contaminants with water per directions on the bottle. The neutral pH cleanser may be purchased at flooring and tile supply centers or from commercial janitorial chemical dealers. Do not use sulfamic, hydrochloric or muriatic acids. These acids are too harsh and may etch the grout rather than cleanse it or could bleach out carpeting if they come in contact with it. The neutral pH cleanser will not damage the grout if used properly and can also be used for daily floor maintenance.
7. Apply the neutral pH cleanser to the grout and let it soak for approximately five minutes. Again, scrub with a nylon bristle brush or a Palmyra deck brush.
8. Vacuum up the neutral pH cleanser with a wet-vacuum or sponge mop the surface dry.
9. Allow the grout to dry for 24-48 hours in nonhumid weather before applying a commercial waterborne penetrating grout sealer.

Sealing the grout

After the grout has been thoroughly cleaned and permitted to dry, it is necessary to apply a water-based penetrating sealer (sometimes referred to as an "impregnator"). The sealer will provide protection from water and oil-borne contaminants while helping to maintain grout coloration, consistency, and stability. Most water-based penetrating sealers emit little or no odor, have minimal volatile organic compounds, dry to an invisible finish, and are easy to apply. This vapor permeable sealer will not accept dirt or grime as some silicone-based sealers do, thus making it easier to maintain a clean grout appearance.

The easiest method to apply the water-based penetrating sealer is to mop the sealer over the entire floor surface (if the floor surface is porous) and allow the sealer to flow into the grout joints. It is recommended to do a test patch first in a corner to determine surface porosity. After applying, the excess sealer can be removed from the floor surface by wiping it up with rags or by buffing the flooring surface after drying.

Inconsistent grout color

One problem that the housekeeping staff will not be able to easily remedy is inconsistent grout color. Even if the grout is clean, grout color that was not consistent to begin with is a difficult problem to solve. One way to fix it is through the arduous task of chiseling out and replacing the grout between the surfaces. However, this is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor.

For grout that is in good shape but inconsistent in color, a more practical solution is to reseal the grout lines with a colored sealer that is extremely resistant to fading and chemical attack. Several commercial waterborne penetrating grout sealers contain high tech polymers and can be dyed to almost any color desired while still affording protection against weathering, leaching and streaking. The sealer will need to be carefully painted into the grout joints and then wiped off the tiles or stone surface with a damp rag before it dries. Beware, this undertaking is a very tedious and time-consuming process and requires a hands-and-knees approach.

(Stan Zimmer is TRC's stone and tile expert and the owner of Marble Shine Services. Based out of Sac City, Iowa, Marble Shine Services provides expert consulting, restoration, and stone and tile care cleaning products to hotels and commercial facilities. He may be reached at 712-662-3211 or marble@prairieinet.net).