



Caring For Your Wood Floors

In a comfortable home with slight humidity variations through the seasons, wood flooring responds by expanding and contracting. These changes may be noticeable. During warm humid weather, wood expands. During dry weather, wood contracts. This seasonal movement is a normal characteristic of wood flooring. It never stops, regardless of the age of the wood. One of the best ways to ensure that wood flooring will give the performance homeowners expect is to install humidity controls and ensure they are functioning before the flooring is installed.

Working with Humidity Controls

The homeowner who chooses hardwood flooring is making an investment in a floor that will last 40 years or more. To protect this investment, humidity controls should be installed to help the floor maintain a beautiful, trouble-free appearance.

Cracks and Separations Between Boards

Nearly every hardwood floor endures some separation between boards. In winter, when homes are heated and the air is dry, wood flooring gives up some of its moisture, and therefore shrinks. This shrinkage results in thin cracks between boards. This is normal and homeowners should be forewarned. It is an acceptable change in the wood and homeowners should not call installers at the first sign of cracks. Once the indoor heat is turned off in the spring and the indoor environment regains moisture, most of these cracks will close up.

The cure for cracks? Homeowners should add moisture to the air during dry periods. It your choice – live with the cracks and wait until spring, or add humidity by opening the dishwasher after the rinse cycle, or by switching off the bathroom fans. Better yet, install a humidifier in the furnace, or an exterior air vent for the furnace burner.

If cracks are a concern, laminated flooring moves less and shows fewer gaps.

Moisture From the House

There are many sources of moisture from within a house. Mopping the floor in a 150-square foot kitchen can release the equivalent of 4 ½ pints of water into the air. A shower or tub releases about ½ pint, or washing the dinner dishes releases about ½ pint. A family of four gives off about ½ pint of water per hour just from breathing (this is why bedrooms are unexpected moisture sources). As moisture is released in the house, it moves to all rooms by natural air movement or by forced air movement from the furnace or air conditioner.

Moisture From Mechanical Systems

Moisture is sometimes introduced into the crawl space from the mechanical systems within the house. To avoid this, make sure the clothes dryer is vented to the outside. Also, condensated water from cooling systems and water from automatic icemakers should be discharged away from the building.

Relative Humidity

When humidity increases, the effect on a wood floor can be damaging. This occurs most frequently in homes in which occupants are there for a short period of time, such as a weekend home or a vacation cabin, or in rooms that are closed off (not heated) to save energy.

If air conditioning or heating is not used or is shut off, ventilation is a must even when the home is not occupied. Otherwise, the floor will expand in the high humidity and cupping and buckling will occur. This “greenhouse effect” will be exaggerated even more when a plank floor has been installed because wider boards react to moisture with more movement.

Growing Boards

How much can temperature and humidity affect the dimensions of a hardwood floor?

Let's take a look at one 5” red oak plank board.

1. Within “normal living conditions” (interior temperature of 70 degrees and a relative humidity of 40%), the board has a moisture content of 7.7% and is 5” wide.
2. If the relative humidity falls to 20 percent, the moisture content of the board will be 4.5%, and the same 5” board will shrink by .059”. Across 10 feet of flooring, that could translate to as much as 1.4” of shrinkage.
3. If the humidity rises to 65%, the board's moisture content would be 12% and the same 5” board would expand by .079”. Across 10 feet of flooring, this could translate to 1.9” of expansion.

Some Tips on Maintenance

The enjoyment of wood flooring depends on some routine, but minimal maintenance details.

These include:

- Sweep your floors or use a dust mop daily. Do not use a household dust treatment, as this may cause your floors to become slick or dull to the finish.
- Vacuum your floor regularly, as often as you would vacuum carpets.
- Clean your floor's coated surface with a lightly dampened cloth, using a recommended cleaning product according to the manufacturer's directions.
- Never damp mop a wood floor. In all cases, use minimum water because water causes deterioration of the wood itself, as well as the finish.
- Buy a “floor care kit” that your installer or flooring retailer recommends instead of depending on a homemade remedy of vinegar and water to clean your floors. Different finishes have different maintenance requirements, and it's best to follow professional advice in this area.
- Clean light stains by rubbing with a damp cloth.
- Avoid using mops or cloths that leave excessive water on the floor. Never let a spill of water dry on the floor.
- Control humidity levels by using a dehumidifier or humidifier. You may need to add portable units in some rooms.
- Have your floors recoated periodically as the finish shows wear.
- Do not clean your wood floors with water or water-based products on a regular schedule. Clean only when necessary and clean only the soiled areas.