

## A Strong Foundation

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With the winter season fast approaching, many restaurant owners and managers are likely making plans for festive holiday gatherings for their guests. It's a busy time of the year with a lot going on.

But one thing that should not be overlooked during and after the holiday season is protecting floors, especially hard surface floors in the front of the house. Winter brings snow, ice, rain, slush and, what can be the biggest culprit of all, ice melt. And in most parts of the country, the worst of it arrives in December and continues through March.

These are the months when we use the most ice melt. But just as ice melt is designed to melt ice, it can do the same to the finish or sealant on your hard-surface floor. Calcium chloride, a common only used ice melt, absorbs moisture, but when it gets tracked into a restaurant, it can also create a film on hard floors, which raises the risks of slip-and-fall accidents. Further, many types of ice melt can also work their way into the pores of the floor and into carpet fibers, causing damage.

Protecting your floors during these winter months requires a two part approach. There are steps that should be taken before the worst of winter arrives and another set to take beginning in December. Because this is most specifically true of hard-surface floors, such as wood, stone (marble, granite, etc.), vinyl tile, luxury vinyl tile and many types of green floors, our focus here will be primarily on hard-surface floors.

### Step One: Before Winter Begins

If at all possible, any stripping (removing finish from the floor) and refinishing (waxing, as it was once called) should be performed in the fall and not during the coldest months of the year. Many managers in all types of facilities, not just restaurants, are unaware of this. As a result, they can have a difficult time throughout the winter keeping their floors looking their best.

The problem is that some floor-care cleaning solutions, most specifically floor finishes, do not work as effectively when a floor is cold. After applying finish to a floor, it first dries to the touch— it feels dry when touching it or when rubbing a tissue over the floor— and then it hardens. The hardening process is what ensures the finish will adhere properly to the floor. If the floor is cold, it can negatively impact the hardening process.

The primary function of floor finish is not the shine it produces but the protection it provides— much like a thin piece of glass over the floor. But if it is not properly hardened, this protection may become weak. This means if soil, moisture or our friend ice melt is walked onto the floor, the potential for damaging the floor or the finish is increased.

We recommend stripping and refinishing floors before December in preparation for the coldest winter months. Once this has been performed, take the following floor-care steps as winter arrives:

- Clean the floors on a daily basis. Instead of sweeping, use a backpack or canister vacuum cleaner. When sweeping, a considerable amount of dust becomes airborne and can land on light fixtures, wall hangings, ledges, chairs, etc. Vacuuming also protects indoor air quality.
- Use pH-neutral cleaning solutions. More powerful cleaning solutions may damage the floor's finish.
- When damp mopping the floor, be aware that once the bucket solution and mop become soiled, the mop is spreading soil on the floor, not removing it. Change the mop head and bucket cleaning solution frequently. (If possible, use a trolley bucket. It will dispense fresh cleaning solution directly to the floor from a spigot below the bucket.)
- The floor should be gently machine polished or scrubbed with a low-speed buffer. This will help loosen soils on the surface, restore the shine, and protect the floor and its finish. Make sure to use the appropriate pad.
- Similarly, if a high-speed finish has been applied to the floor, a burnisher can be used. This will help restore a high-gloss shine to the floor.
- Always allow the floor to thoroughly dry before placing mats down. Trapped moisture can damage the floor or finish.

#### Step Two: Once Winter Has Arrived

The most effective way to protect front-of-the-house floors from December to March is with an effective floor mat system. We are not talking about placing a floor mat here or there by the door. We are talking about a real "system" developed to protect floors and ensure the safety of patrons.

Restaurant owners/managers should look for "high-performance" mats. As the name implies, they are designed to be more effective at trapping and storing soils and moisture. ("Storing" means soil and moisture are trapped or stored within the mat, so they are not spread around by foot traffic.) This type of mat is available from different manufacturers and some mat rental services. Other than the fact that they perform more effectively, as the name implies, high-performance mats also tend to last longer, which is reflected in their longer warranties.

Three types of high-performance mats are available:

**Scraper mats.** These mats, as the name implies, scrape larger soil off of shoe bottoms. They are placed outside the restaurant.

**Wiper/scraper mats.** Many restaurants have a vestibule area directly inside their entries. This is a perfect place for a wiper/scraper mat; however, the mat can also be installed directly inside the property. This mat is designed to remove more of the larger soil, as well as smaller soil and moisture.

Wiper mats. Often called the final line of defense, the wiper mat further wipes shoe bottoms to clean and remove moisture. This mat should extend into the dining room.

All three types of mats should be at least 5 feet long, a total of 15 feet, and installed one after the other. This should stop about 70 percent of soils and moisture from being walked onto the floor. Some cleaning experts suggest even longer lengths, 20 to even 30 feet. In very harsh winters, a longer mat system may prove more effective.

### Carpet Care

While our focus here has been on hard-surface floor care, many restaurants have carpeted dining rooms, so we should address their winter care needs, too. Just as with hard-surface floors, carpet should be cleaned before winter arrives. Most cleaning professionals agree that the extraction method is most effective. By cleaning the carpet before winter arrives, we are essentially starting fresh with a clean carpet.

Many restaurants have their carpets cleaned once per month or once every two or three months. During the winter, the frequency should be increased. Here's the concern: If soil and moisture are tracked on to the floor, they get pounded into carpet fibers with foot traffic. This can make them more difficult to remove. Further, as the soil is pounded into the carpet, it can cut and damage carpet fibers. This shortens the lifespan of the carpet.

It's always a good idea to have carpet cleaned before it begins to show soiling. Once it does, it may be too late to effectively remove the soils.

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