Hardwood Floor Care and Maintenance Guide

Revision: November 2026 · Reviewed by John McGlocklin, Owner

This hardwood floor care and maintenance guide explains how to keep Elemental Hardwoods solid and engineered flooring looking its best for decades. It covers routine cleaning, which products are safe, how to manage indoor humidity for each product type, protecting the surface from scratches and sunlight, and when to renew the finish. It applies in full to Elemental prefinished floors; for solid flooring finished on site, see the note on site-finished floors below. Following it also keeps your floor within the terms of the Elemental Hardwoods engineered, solid and finish warranties.

The three habits that matter most

If you do nothing else, do these three things from the day your floor is installed:

1. **Keep grit off the floor.** Fine sand tracked in on shoes acts like sandpaper on any finish. Mats at the doors and frequent dry cleaning prevent most wear.
2. **Keep water off the floor.** Wood and standing liquid do not mix. Clean with a lightly misted pad, never a wet mop, and wipe spills up right away.
3. **Keep the humidity steady.** Wood swells in humid weather and shrinks in dry weather. Holding the home within the range for your product (Section 6) prevents most gaps, cupping and cracks.

Prefinished or site-finished: which care applies

Prefinished floors. Elemental prefinished flooring arrives with a factory-applied, UV-cured urethane finish reinforced with aluminum oxide. The finish brand and sheen differ from one product to another, so for details about a particular floor, ask the retailer or installer who supplied it. Everything in this guide applies to these floors.

Site-finished floors. Elemental unfinished solid flooring is sanded and finished after installation, and the finish chosen can be anything from a waterborne or oil-modified urethane to a penetrating oil or hardwax oil. The cleaning products, maintenance coats and recoat timing for those floors are set by the finish manufacturer and the contractor who applied it, not by Elemental Hardwoods, so follow their written care instructions. The rest of this guide, covering grit, water, humidity, furniture and sunlight, still applies.

1. Stopping dirt at the door

Most finish wear starts at the entrance. Grit carried indoors gets ground into the surface under every footstep, so the best cleaning routine is the one that keeps dirt from arriving in the first place.

- Put a mat outside **and** inside every exterior door. The outdoor mat catches coarse dirt; the indoor mat picks up what is left on the soles.
- Lay runners or area rugs in hallways and other heavy traffic lanes, at the turning points on stair landings, and in doorways between rooms, where people pivot and wear concentrates.
- Choose rugs and rug pads with a breathable backing. Rubber, latex and vinyl backings can trap moisture and discolor or mark the finish beneath them.
- Shake out or vacuum mats often. A mat full of sand stops protecting the floor.
- Consider a shoes-off household, or at least keep outdoor work shoes and sports footwear at the door.

2. Routine cleaning: how often to sweep, vacuum and clean

Your floor's finish is its protective layer, and routine care is about preserving that layer. How often you clean depends on traffic, pets and the season; homes with children, dogs or sandy soil outside need more attention.

How often	What to do
Daily, or whenever grit is visible	Dust-mop with a microfiber or soft-bristle dust mop, or sweep with a soft broom

How often	What to do
Weekly	Vacuum with the hard-floor (bare floor) setting or a brush or felt-head attachment
Every 1–4 weeks, as soil builds up	Clean with an approved hardwood cleaner on a microfiber pad
Monthly, and at each change of season	Check indoor humidity; clean mats, felt pads and vacuum wheels
Every 3–5 years, or when the sheen looks dull	Have a flooring professional evaluate the finish for a recoat (Section 8)

Vacuuming tips

- Turn off or remove any rotating beater bar or brush roll. Spinning bristles and hard rollers can scuff and scratch the finish.
- Check the vacuum's wheels and base before every use. Small stones or grit caught in a wheel will leave a trail of scratches across the room.
- Robot vacuums are fine if they have a hard-floor mode and soft wheels; keep their wheels and bumpers clean too.
- **Wire-brushed and hand-scraped floors** hold fine grit in the low points of their texture. Use a soft-bristle brush attachment and a microfiber mop that reaches into the grain, and dry-clean these floors a little more often than smooth ones.

Damp cleaning the right way

1. Dry-clean first. Wiping a floor that still holds grit drags the grit across the finish.
2. Mist an approved wood floor cleaner onto the microfiber pad, or very lightly onto a small area of floor, so the surface is barely damp.
3. Work with the length of the boards and let the floor dry within a minute or two. If the floor stays wet longer than that, you are using too much liquid.
4. Rinse or replace the pad when it becomes soiled.

3. Which cleaners to use and which to avoid

The wrong cleaner can haze the finish, leave a slippery film, or make a future recoat impossible because new finish will not bond over the residue. Using products that are not approved also voids the warranty.

Use: a ready-to-use cleaner made for urethane-finished wood floors, such as Bona, Basic Coatings Squeaky, Pallmann or DuraSeal hardwood floor cleaner, applied as the label directs. Floors finished on site may call for the finish maker's own cleaning system instead.

Do not use	Why
Wet mops, string mops, steam mops or anything that floods the floor	Water and heat drive moisture into joints, causing swelling, cupping and finish damage
Oil soap, pine soap, lemon oil, wax or furniture polish	Leave a residue that dulls the finish, attracts dirt and blocks a future recoat
Silicone sprays and "mop and shine" or acrylic restorer products	Build a slippery film that is difficult to remove and prevents recoating
Ammonia, chlorine bleach or vinegar	Can etch, dull or discolor the finish and the wood beneath it
Products made for sheet vinyl, tile, laminate or stone	Formulated for other surfaces; they dull wood finishes and can make the floor slippery
Abrasive powders, scouring pads or steel wool	Scratch through the finish
General-purpose household cleaners and dish soap	Leave a film and are not designed for wood finishes

4. Spills, water and wet areas

Water is the most common cause of avoidable damage to wood floors. A single spill wiped up promptly is harmless; liquid left to stand, or repeated wetting in the same spot, can swell the boards, open the joints and leave dark stains that cannot be cleaned out.

- Blot spills immediately with a soft, absorbent cloth, then wipe the area dry.
- Put a washable, breathable-backed rug in front of the kitchen sink, dishwasher, refrigerator water dispenser, wet bars and any other spot where water or dropped items are likely.
- Place trays under potted plants and pet water bowls, and never set a plant pot directly on the floor.
- Watch for slow leaks from dishwashers, refrigerators, sinks and windows. Repeated small drips cause more harm than one large spill because they are noticed late.
- Clean up pet accidents right away. Urine left on a floor can stain the wood permanently.

5. Preventing scratches and dents

Every wood floor, including the hardest exotic species, will dent and scratch under enough force. A few precautions keep the marks small and few.

Furniture

- Fit felt pads to the feet of every chair, table, sofa and cabinet before it goes on the floor. Check them every few months and replace any that are worn, flattened or packed with grit.
- Use wide, non-marring casters on rolling furniture, and a protective mat under desk chairs.
- Lift furniture when moving it; never drag it. For heavy items such as appliances, pianos and bookcases, use a furniture dolly on a sheet of plywood or hardboard, or slide the item on thick moving blankets or carpet scraps placed soft side down.

Footwear

- Avoid walking on the floor in sports cleats, golf shoes or stiletto heels, especially heels with worn or missing tips that expose the metal pin. The force under a narrow heel is enough to dent any hardwood.
- Shoes with damaged soles or exposed nails and studs can gouge the surface.

Pets

- Keep pets' nails trimmed and their paws clean. Dirt, sand and oils carried on paws wear and mark the finish.

6. Humidity and temperature: protecting your floor from seasonal movement

Wood is a natural material that continually exchanges moisture with the air around it. When the air is humid the boards absorb moisture and swell; when the air is dry they release it and shrink. Large swings in relative humidity (RH) cause the problems homeowners notice most: gaps between boards in winter, cupping or crowning in summer, and checks or cracks in the surface.

Keep your home within these ranges all year, for the life of the floor:

Product	Temperature	Relative humidity
Solid hardwood flooring	60–80°F	30–50% (Elemental Hardwoods requirement)
Engineered hardwood flooring	60–80°F	35–55% (Elemental Hardwoods requirement)
Any floor over radiant heat	Floor surface 80°F max	35–50%

Why the ranges differ. Elemental Hardwoods solid flooring is kiln-dried to a moisture content that performs best near 40% RH, so its range sits slightly lower. Engineered flooring has a cross-layered core that resists movement, so its range is set a little higher to protect the wear layer from drying out.

How to stay in range

- Place an inexpensive digital hygrometer (humidity monitor) in the main living area and check it monthly and whenever the season changes.
- Run your heating and air conditioning year-round, including when the home is empty for long periods. Do not shut off climate control in a vacant home.
- In dry winters, or in homes with radiant or forced-air heat, a whole-house humidifier is usually needed to stay above the minimum.
- In humid summers or damp climates, air conditioning or a dehumidifier keeps RH from climbing above the maximum.
- Keep basements and crawl spaces dry; moisture from below affects the floor above.

What is normal. Some movement is natural. Hairline gaps that open in the driest part of winter and close again when humidity returns are expected, particularly with solid flooring and wider boards, and are not a defect. Species differ too: very stable woods such as Black Mesquite move little, while Brazilian Teak responds more noticeably to humidity changes. Wider boards also move more than narrow ones. Persistent wide gaps, cupping, or cracking are signs the home is outside its range; correct the humidity first, and call in a flooring professional if the problem continues.

Radiant heat. If your floor is installed over radiant heat, keep the floor surface at or below 80°F and hold indoor humidity between 35% and 50%, following NWFA guidance. Radiant systems dry the wood from below, so humidify through the heating season and change the heat setting gradually rather than all at once.

7. Sunlight and natural color change

All wood changes color with age, and many species are photosensitive: exposure to light, whether direct sun or ordinary indoor light, speeds the change. Several exotic woods in the Elemental Hardwoods range darken markedly as they mature, among them Brazilian Cherry, Tigerwood, Canarywood and Patagonian Rosewood. Brazilian Cherry, for example, moves from a salmon-orange tone to a deep reddish brown within its first months. The color a floor shows on installation day is therefore not its final color. This change is part of the wood's natural character and is not covered by the warranty. The same is true of the natural differences in color, grain and figure from one board to the next: they are what make a real wood floor, and they are not defects.

- Use blinds, shades or UV-filtering window film in rooms with strong direct sun.
- Move area rugs and furniture every few months, especially during the first year, so the floor beneath them does not stay lighter than the exposed floor around them.
- Expect any new boards added later, for example in a repair, to look different at first and to blend in as they age.

8. Renewing the finish: when to recoat

With good routine care a factory finish lasts many years, but every finish eventually dulls in heavy traffic areas. Renewing it before wear reaches the wood keeps the floor protected and avoids a full sanding.

- **Screen and recoat (refresh).** This is the usual way to renew a prefinished floor: rather than sanding to bare wood, a flooring professional deep-cleans and lightly abrades the existing finish, then applies a fresh maintenance coat. NWFA suggests a recoat every 3–5 years for typical households, sooner in busy homes. Factory aluminum oxide finishes are very hard, so new finish will only bond with the help of specialty recoat or bonding products made for the purpose. The right product and process depend on the floor, so treat each recoat case by case with an experienced flooring professional or your Elemental Hardwoods dealer, and test adhesion in a small area first.
- **Site-finished floors** are recoated according to the finish manufacturer's system.
- **Sand and refinish.** When scratches reach the wood or the finish is worn through, the floor must be sanded to bare wood and refinished. Solid flooring can be sanded several times over its life. Engineered flooring can be

sanded only as many times as its wear layer allows; ask a professional to check the wear layer thickness before sanding.

- Avoid the cleaners listed in Section 3. Residue from waxes, oils, polishes and silicone is the most common reason a recoat fails.

9. Care-related conditions the warranty does not cover

Elemental Hardwoods has three separate warranties: one for engineered flooring, one for solid flooring, and one for factory finishes. See the ones that apply to your product for the full terms. Damage resulting from the following is not covered:

- Indoor humidity outside the range for your product (Section 6), or moisture from leaks, floods, wet mopping or standing water
- Cleaning with products that are not approved for wood floors (Section 3)
- Scratches, dents and wear from grit, pets, furniture, footwear or moving heavy items
- Color change caused by sunlight or natural aging
- Radiant heat systems allowed to exceed 80°F at the floor surface

Frequently asked questions

How often should I clean my hardwood floors?

Dust-mop or sweep daily, or whenever you see grit, and vacuum weekly on the bare floor setting. Damp-clean with an approved wood floor cleaner every one to four weeks, depending on how much traffic the floor gets.

Can I use a steam mop on hardwood floors?

No. Steam forces heat and moisture into the joints and the finish, which can cause cupping, whitening of the finish and gaps. Steam mop damage is not covered by the warranty.

Can I clean my wood floors with vinegar and water?

We advise against it. Vinegar is acidic and can dull the finish over time, and mopping with a water solution puts too much liquid on the floor. Use a cleaner made for urethane-finished wood floors.

What humidity should I keep my house at for hardwood floors?

Keep it between 30% and 50% RH for Elemental Hardwoods solid flooring and between 35% and 55% RH for engineered flooring, with the temperature between 60 and 80°F, all year. Floors over radiant heat do best between 35% and 50% RH.

Why do gaps appear between my floorboards in winter?

Heating dries the indoor air, and the boards shrink as they give up moisture. Small seasonal gaps that close again in spring are normal. A humidifier keeps them to a minimum.

Why is my new exotic hardwood floor getting darker?

Many exotic species, including Brazilian Cherry, Tigerwood, Canarywood and Patagonian Rosewood, are photosensitive and deepen in color as light reaches them. This is normal aging, not a defect. Move rugs and furniture now and then so the whole floor ages evenly.

Is it safe to put area rugs on a hardwood floor?

Yes, and rugs in high-traffic areas help protect the finish. Use a breathable rug pad rather than a rubber or vinyl-backed one, and move rugs occasionally so the floor ages evenly.

How do I stop my dog from scratching the floor?

Keep the dog's nails trimmed, wipe its paws after time outside, and use runners in the lanes it uses most. Fine surface scratches are expected in any home with pets and can be reduced at the next recoat.

When should my floor be recoated?

When the finish looks dull in traffic areas but the wood itself is not exposed, usually every three to five years. Have a flooring professional check that the new finish will bond to the existing one.

How do I care for a floor that was finished on site?

Follow the care instructions from the finish manufacturer and the contractor who applied it, since products and recoat schedules vary by finish. The protective habits in this guide still apply.

Questions and buying Elemental flooring

Shopping for flooring, or have a question about a specific Elemental Hardwoods product? Visit elementalhardwoods.com or call (504) 756-8876; we are always glad to help.

For general wood floor care questions, the best sources are your installer, the maker of your cleaner or finish, and the National Wood Flooring Association at nwfa.org.

Sources

Care recommendations in this guide are consistent with the maintenance guidance of the National Wood Flooring Association, together with Elemental Hardwoods' own requirements for indoor conditions, which are stricter where labeled.