

How To Install Ceramic Tile

By John Davison

Installing new flooring is often a key component of a home remodeling project. While it might be tempting to just order some carpet, you might want to consider a wood or vinyl floor, particularly in the kitchen. People debate whether new flooring should be installed first or last in a major remodeling project. I fall firmly in the “do-the-flooring-last” camp. If new flooring is added at the end of the project, you won't have to worry about paint slopping on your new floor, dropped tools chipping it or heavy materials gouging it. While some may say they want new floor to be installed so that cabinets can be set on top of it or for other reasons, given that new flooring could be a sizable part of your investment, why take the chance?

There are lots of different flooring options to consider. Early on, you'll want to shop the options. Draw a map of the room(s) you want to install new flooring in. Measure the room as best you can. To get the square footage of the room, multiply the length times the width. You may have to consider the room in sections if it's in an L-shape or there are a lot of cutouts.

Make note of the direction of your flooring if it has a pattern that runs in a certain direction. Also, be sure to order a minimum of 10 percent more than what you think you'll need. This will account for any pieces you cut wrong; odd cuts you need to make or future patch-ups. Re-ordering flooring is not easy. Some styles can have amazing variations and manufacturers can stop making a particular style with no warning to the retailer.

Preparing your old floor

Often, you can install a new floor over an old one if the old one is solid, smooth and stable enough. Old wood floors are usually ripped out. But old resilient floors are usually left in place. Also, if you plan to use ceramic tile, consider how high it will be in relation to adjoining floors.

If you're putting a new floor over an old resilient floor that has an embossed surface or other surface irregularities, a new underlayment is usually required—generally a layer of quarter-inch lauan plywood. The seams and nail heads should then be covered with latex underlayment or some other non-shrinking filler – think of it as spackling for your floor – and sanded smooth after it dries. Otherwise, the irregularities will transfer to the new surface and weaken the adhesive.

Installing ceramic tile

This is a big job that can be a little messy, but is relatively easy to do – if you don't mind a few days on your hands and knees. On most floors, other than cement, you'll want to put down a ½" Durock cement board. The cement board is screwed down using drywall screws and the screw heads and gaps between the boards are covered with a latex underlayment. The cement board must be then settled down before screwing down or the warranty will not be valid.

Again, I like to lay out at least part of the floor prior to starting the actual installation, so I can figure out where the cut pieces will end up. Many home improvement stores rent wet saws, which will make cutting the ceramic easy.

Ceramic is installed by using mortar. Mortar is sold as a powder that is mixed with water and then troweled on to the floor. I like to spread enough mortar to lay about a dozen pieces of ceramic, install those and then move on. Use plastic spacers to make sure you are maintaining a uniform gap between your pieces.

If your room is of a size that allows you to lay all the tile in one day, you'll want to let it dry over night before you add the grout, the material that fills the lines between the tiles. Again, grout is a powder you mix with water. You apply the grout with a float, a squeegee type of device that allows you to force the grout into the gaps. Keep a bucket of water and sponge nearby, as you'll want to clean as you go.

The grout should cure for 24 hours before the floor is considered ready for use. After a minimum of three days, a grout sealer should be applied to help prevent mold or mildew from taking root in the porous grout.

Make sure to follow all manufacturers' instructions. You want a floor you can be proud of and nothing beats a job well done the first time. All flooring, flooring supplies, tools - even advice - should be available at your nearest floor covering, home improvement or hardware store.