

What is Vinyl?

Vinyl fabric is made by laminating a top and bottom layer of vinyl film to a polyester mesh known as scrim. The film itself consists of PVC blended with pigments for color, stabilizers for flame retardancy, biocides to reduce mildew and oils (plasticizers), which give the PVC flexibility. Without these plasticisers, the PVC and the fabric made with it would be rigid and brittle.

What damages vinyl and shortens its life expectancy?

Whether through deterioration in aesthetic appeal or loss of integrity due to physical damage, vinyl products are specifically designed to be temporary, portable, and replaceable. A variety of factors influence the length of life you can expect from your vinyl product. Most premature failures are due to physical damage - cuts, scrapes, pulling stress, and the wear and tear caused by setup and tear down. But even well cared for vinyl products will eventually show their age and become visually less appealing. This is due almost exclusively to two factors - exposure to UV rays of the sun and mildew. While scientifically it is possible to develop paints and other chemicals that resist fading, in order to keep vinyl flexible and affordable many of those options aren't possible in vinyl films. Largely due to tighter EPA controls on the chemicals that can be used in dyes, vinyl film is susceptible to UV damage. Paler colors (yellow, pinks, and other light colors) are especially prone to fading, as are reds and other brighter fluorescents. The UV rays tend to dry out the oils in the vinyl, which makes the top brittle and eventually thins out the film itself. At this time there is no known topical treatment to prevent this drying action, although many customers report some success with treatments including ArmorAll and even auto wax. These methods are not supported by the makers of the fabric, but they also appear to do no harm. If these methods work for you, great!

Mildew is another major cause of premature aging in vinyl products. While the PVC contains biocides to reduce mildew, nothing can prevent its growth in the right conditions. This is a special concern of users near major cities where smog and pollution tend to accumulate on vinyl, which in turn holds moisture and prevents proteins on which mildew feeds. All fabric is prone to mildew, but lighter colors seem to be more susceptible and, of course, once attacked by mildew, it is more visible on them as well. The best solution to this problem is prevention by regular cleaning with a mildew detergent (Ivory liquid or similar). The use of harsher cleaners is not recommended because many contain degreasers that can actually dry the oils out of the PVC. On a spot basis, such cleaners may have to be used, but it is important to break down those cleaners with a detergent like Ivory and rinse thoroughly. Avoid the use of such chemicals as acetone or similar products that can actually melt the vinyl. Bleach should also be avoided as much as possible. Even though the addition of a small amount (less than 10%) of bleach to your cleanser can aid in the effectiveness of the cleanser, it is very hard on the vinyl and even worse on the thread. Repeated use of bleach in the cleaning solution will cause premature thread decay, and the product may literally fall apart at the seams.

How should I clean my vinyl?

1. Clean your items regularly. If your top is noticeably dirty or has a filmy goo on it, you've waited too long.
2. Clean your items with a soft shop-type broom and soapy water in an area that won't cause damage to the top. Unless you use an old tarp to cover the ground first, you should avoid asphalt, as the oils in asphalt will stick to the item and melt into the vinyl. Cement surfaces can be used, but only if they are smooth enough not to cause pinholes when those cleaning the item walk on it. Grassy surfaces have their own limitations (grass and dirt stick to the items being cleaned), but if they are free of rocks and sticks they offer a safe place to wash vinyl fabrics.
3. Use only mild detergents and RINSE, RINSE, RINSE after cleaning. Be especially careful of turning clean tops over as the soap sticks to the side facing the ground. If at all possible, rinse the top in a way that allows the water to drain off rather than pool on or under it.
4. Do not use commercial washing machines. The metal fittings on the items will cut and scrape the fabric, allowing water to penetrate into the scrim and inviting mildew problems.
5. Do not use high-pressure washers. The pressure is so great it can peel the film off the scrim in seconds and ruin the vinyl.
6. In severe cases where a top has been neglected or the setting has not allowed it to be cleaned as you like, there is a special-purpose cleaner available called Pro-Tec. It should not be used for regular cleaning as it will shorten the life of the product, but it will remove the goeey mildew on the surface of most vinyls. And if it won't, then its to late for any cleaner to do any good.