

Sit in the Sun

Proper cleaning and maintenance will extend the life of your outdoor furniture.

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There is a great diversity of opinions about how outdoor furniture should be cleaned and maintained. With proper maintenance, hoteliers can prolong the life of their vinyl strapped outdoor furniture. Using these care and maintenance tips can also reduce repair and replacement costs.

Taking care of vinyl finish

New vinyl and paint both have finishes on them. Pool chlorine, bleach, solvents and many commercial cleaning solutions will damage these finishes. This damage accelerates staining, fading and ultimate failure of the vinyl and paint. Cleaning with such chemicals can cut the life expectancy of vinyl and paint in half. The average life of vinyl in commercial use is about two to three years, and paint lasts about four to five years. Proper cleaning and maintenance may more than double these numbers.

Vinyl is a porous material

Vinyl pores must breathe and should not be clogged with suntan lotions and body oils. Damage to the finish due to improper cleaning, along with commercial use and exposure, results in mildew and other fungi becoming firmly rooted in the pores. The vinyl soon becomes stained and virtually impossible to clean. At this point, the damage is done and it is time for new vinyl. The use of vinyl "protectants" are not recommended because they may combine with other chemicals in the commercial environment, get baked in by the sun and clog the pores like oils. The furniture may look great for a while, and then the straps may suddenly start to break.

Suntan oil

Suntan oil contains iodine and other caustic chemicals that stain vinyl. Without proper removal, these chemicals will become baked in by the sun and will eat away the finish of the vinyl. Ultimately, the stains will degrade the vinyl, causing it to crack and break. The combination of sunshine, pool chlorine and suntan oil is fatal to vinyl.

Other sources of stains

Avoid using unfiltered well water or ground water when cleaning the furniture, and pay attention to where the wind blows the ground water from sprinkler systems. Unfiltered water often causes staining of outdoor furniture due to sulfur, iron oxide and other minerals commonly found in ground water in certain states. Only fresh city water or filtered well water should be used.

If your hotel is in a tropical area, pods and the bark of many tropical trees and shrubs can cause stains. Small pods from flowers fall to the ground and leave brown stains. The primary staining agent is tannic acid, which is used in the tanning of leather, dyeing of cloth, in the production of paper and silk and as a coagulant in the manufacturing of rubber. Tannic acid is found in many trees and shrubs, such as:

- Most species of Oak trees
- Palm trees and Palmetto shrubs
- Most species of Mangroves
- Golden-yellow color pigment in autumn leaves
- Kola and Eucalyptus trees and shrubs
- Horehound and other plants in the mint family
- Hickory and other nut husks
- Galls -- swelling of plant tissue due to parasites -- and the bark of Tamarisk trees and shrubs
- Bark and foliage of Sumac and other trees and shrubs in the cashew family

If you see yellow or brown stains on decks, pump houses and outside walls, stains may also occur on nearby outdoor furniture.

Colors

Years ago, when the lead was taken out of gas, it was also taken out of vinyl. Without the lead in the vinyl, previously good vinyl colors, like browns and beiges, suddenly seemed to stain worse than usual. Today, we know that some colors react much worse than others to chemical staining due to the interaction of the color pigments with chemicals found in the commercial environment. Red pigment seems to be the source of the worst problems. Most browns and beiges, and all peach, rose, mauve, red, burgundy and orange shades are most susceptible to staining and degrading. Blues, greens and yellows are less susceptible. White and off-white are the most durable of all colors.

When choosing vinyl strap colors, keep in mind that the darker a color is, the hotter it gets, the more it will fade and the quicker it will break down. It is generally best to choose pastel colors rather than dark colors. However, there are some benefits to using very dark colors: they hide stains better and they get so hot, they force people to use towels.

Using towels

Hotel pools should have regulations that require all people using the pool furniture to lie on towels. These signs are an excellent idea and should be expressed in the strongest terms: "Do not use the furniture without a towel." If firmly enforced, this practice may double the life of new vinyl.

Pressure cleaning

Perhaps the most efficient method of cleaning commercial patio furniture is with a pressure washer using plain water under low pressure. Mild disinfectant or detergent may be used, but do not use chlorine or harsh cleaning solutions. A mild disinfectant called "quaternary ammonium chloride" is used in pressure-wash solutions and is effective in cleaning and disinfecting patio furniture without harm, if properly used in moderate amounts. It is very important that low pressure be used in pressure cleaning. If the pressure is strong enough to blow the furniture around the deck, it may be strong enough to peel off the finish as well.

Clean with mild soap and warm water

Absent a suitable pressure washer, outdoor furniture should be cleaned with a soft brush, using mild soap and very warm water. Soaps that have emulsifiers that break down common stains and are scum free are the best to use. After a few years, when the finish is worn and plain soap and water will not clean the vinyl any more, begin to add small amounts of household bleach. Start with a capful or two of bleach per gallon of filtered water, working up to half and half during the following year or so. When a half and half solution no longer cleans the vinyl, it's time to start thinking about getting new vinyl straps.

The top surfaces of outdoor furniture, especially chaises, are most critical and should be cleaned weekly or bi-weekly. Simply wipe down the top surfaces and rinse with filtered water. Once every four to six weeks, wipe down the bottom and back surfaces to control mildew.

Wax the frames

Just as your car benefits from annual applications of wax, so will the frames of outdoor furniture. Lightly wax the arms, legs and other non-strapped areas of the frame with high grade, non-abrasive car wax. Do not use compound wax and be sure to wipe off any wax that gets on the vinyl straps.

Commercial cleaning solutions and chlorine

It is a common misconception that pool chlorine, household bleach, chlorine-based cleaners, and other strong solutions and solvents are good for cleaning stained vinyl. Not true. These chemicals are fatal to the vinyl's finish. They will clean well for a time, but they clean by removing layers of the finish along with the staining material on top of the finish. After a while, it becomes impossible to clean the vinyl. It becomes stiff and hard, loses its memory, and begins to crack and break. This is an inescapable process that is accelerated two to three times or more by the use of harsh chemicals. Pool chlorine is about four times stronger and much more caustic than household bleach. Outdoor furniture should never be cleaned with pool chlorine for any reason.

Do not throw furniture in the pool

Never throw your furniture in the swimming pool unless a hurricane is imminent and there is nowhere else to put it. Prolonged exposure to pool chlorine will severely damage the finish of the furniture and will cause corrosion of the aluminum inside the tubing. Also, it is not good for the pool itself, or for the water in the pool, and it certainly is not good for the furniture.

Following these simple rules will result in extended life for your hotel's outdoor furniture. Annual costs will decrease substantially, the furniture will look good and your guests will be happy.

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