



Bathroom Tile and Grout – A Few Tips on Keeping Them Clean

As soon as I mention to someone that I'm 'in the tile business' what I commonly find is that many people have tile somewhere in their home but none of them seem 100 percent sure of the rules on keeping it clean. Sometimes people have the perception that a strong cleaner is necessary to get all the dirt out and that tile is durable so it can withstand scouring with scrubbers, etc. But what are the tips we really want people to know about tile cleaning, especially in bathrooms?

Common Perceptions about Tile Cleaning and Maintenance

One thing to address is the general misperception about cleaning tile, especially in a bathroom, where people think that household cleaners containing bleach are the way to go. This perception is fueled by the visible result when these cleaners are used. Once the cleaner (bleach) is sprayed on an area which has begun to show mildew or perhaps that "pink stuff", the area nearly instantaneously comes clean – even before it's physically touched. Thus, if the mildew returns, the impulse is to clean with this type of cleaner on a regular, say weekly, basis. The effect of using strong cleaners with a high pH (bleach - alkaline) or low pH (vinegar - acidic) on a *regular* basis is that they may break down some sealers which are there to help prevent soap scum, oils, and dirt from penetrating into the grout.

In addition, grout typically contains cement which is alkaline and reacts

with acids, so acidic cleaners like vinegar may eat away at unprotected grout. Acids are not generally recommended to clean tile – period.

If mold and mildew are making repeat performances and reappearing in your bathroom, the substrate behind the tile may be holding water. The materials used in a typical tile installation are not naturally prone to support any kind of mold or mildew, which is why tile is a

typical surface found in wet areas such as commercial showers. However, if there is a system breakdown and water gets trapped in the subsurface, the potential for a problem may arise. Once the surface of the grout is compromised, or the sealer is damaged, with every shower more soap and oily dirt could make their way into the grout, becoming food for the bacteria and organisms, which may be present in the moist areas. They get more food (soap scum, oils, etc.), continue to grow, and you fight back by spraying more bleach.

What's a Way Out?

Bleach or high pH cleaners really do kill those organisms. There are also heavy duty strippers made especially for this purpose on tile. However,



once a deep clean like this is done, the area should be allowed to **dry thoroughly** and a good sealer applied to the grout within, 24 hours, before dirt, oil, etc. get into the unprotected grout. For regular/weekly maintenance, a *neutral* cleaner made specifically for

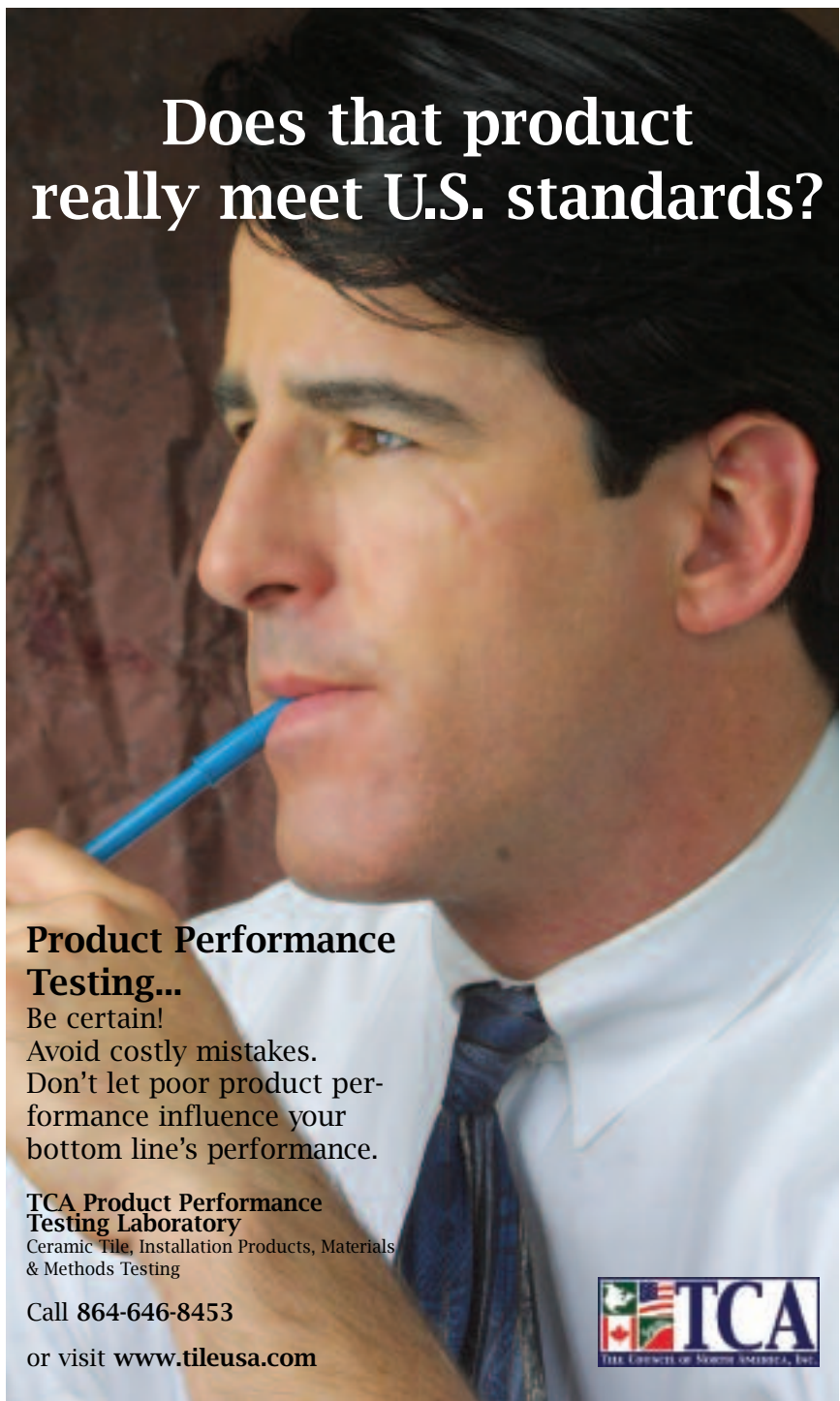
grout and tile or mildly alkaline detergent (Mr. Clean, Spic and Span) and water should be used. Grout sealers may be reapplied once a year while *strong cleaners* are for periodic use only. Nylon or plastic scrubbers are handy and generally won't scratch.

Just Because You've Cleaned, Are You Done?

Not necessarily. One last point to emphasize is the importance of rinsing with *clean, clear* water after cleaning. Any good tile setter will use lots of clean water when wiping down the tile during the grouting process. This is also true during cleaning and maintaining tile. Once tile is cleaned with soap and water or one of the stronger cleaners it's important to thoroughly *rinse* the area to remove residue. Rinsing doesn't mean sloshing around dirty rinse water and letting it dry, it means getting a fresh bucket of clean water. Any residual cleaner, soap, or detergent, must be removed to prevent it from leaving the tile dull and susceptible to more rapid soiling.

How Do I Find the Right Cleaner?

Tile cleaners can be found at your tile retailers, distributors, hardware stores, or by accessing the Tile Council of North America's website at www.tileusa.com (go to Technical Services - Frequently Asked Questions -Tile and Grout Cleaning). Several companies which manufacture products especially for cleaning tile are listed. **TILE**




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