

Types of Wallcoverings

Almost all wallcoverings that are used in homes today fall into these five categories:

The newcomer to the list at the left is the "Non Woven" type. As of 2006, many new sample books contained the nonwovens and many salespeople in the stores are still unfamiliar with them in 2008. After reading this short buyers guide, chances are good you will know more about them than the person selling it to you.

A Removability Index is provided for each material type with 10 being the easiest and zero the worse. The numbers are subjective and are based on my own wallcovering removal experiences. Also of note: **These ratings are based on removability from a properly primed wall.** Without a properly primed wall all removal bets are off. When shopping for wallcovering, you will be way ahead of the game if you are familiar with these material types and how they can best be used to your advantage. Get the perfect look—just be aware of these material types so the perfect look stays perfect through the years.

Fabric Backed Vinyl gets an A+ for durability, scrubbability, and its ability to hide the surface imperfections of walls in older homes. The walls in kitchens, baths, and hallways take the most beating in a home—food and grease, steam from showers, and banging from suitcases or vacuum cleaners can quickly take their toll if the material chosen is not up to rugged standards. Choosing a fabric-backed vinyl is your best assurance that the installation will look great in 10, 15, even 20 years in areas that get wear and tear. When the time comes to remove this material, fabric-backed vinyl is the easiest to remove from a properly primed wall. Walls in older homes can have problems that range from stress cracks and leaky areas, to multiple paint layers of questionable quality. Fabric-backed does the best job of handling these problems because it is flexible and it takes little effort to remove one strip for a quick repair. If fabric-backed vinyl is so wonderful how come it isn't used all the time? Mainly because it's harder to get delicate prints on this material, although manufacturers are getting better all the time at making really fashionable looks in fabric-backed.

Fabric backed removability 8 to 10: Material is pulled from the wall in one piece---no soaking is required.

Paper Backed Vinyl is suitable for most areas in the home. It is scrubbable and will handle general "wear and tear" almost as well as fabric-backed vinyl. The only area that may be questionable is in a frequently used shower area without an exhaust fan. Seams there can have a tendency to show in a year or two in this kind of bathroom. In excessively moist rooms the paper backing wicks up water at the seam degrading the paste bond to the wall or in some cases the paper and vinyl sheet can separate from each other in a process known as delamination. If you want your new wallpaper to look great for many years, use paper-backed vinyl in baths which are used less frequently and have a good exhaust fan to remove

shower steam or in baths that are just so large that steam never builds up in them.

Paper-backed removability 5 to 7: Vinyl top-sheet must be pulled off and the backing must be soaked and scraped. Difficulties arise when the vinyl top sheet is so thin that only tiny pieces pull off the paper backing—that can result in added removal time.

Vinyl Coated Paper is exactly that—a paper that is coated in some way with a vinyl mist. Manufacturers tend to print intricate multi-hued florals and deep colored backgrounds on this type of paper. This type differs in construction from the other two types in that there is no sheet of vinyl laminated to a backing. Without a backing, this wallcovering type doesn't do as good a job of covering up the wall's inherent surface imperfections. If walls are rough, blankstock paper lining can be used to correct the problem. In darker patterns—forest green, navy or cranberry, for example—the vinyl-coated type often has an annoying tendency to burnish or become shiny in spots where you wipe with a damp rag or where kids love to drag their hands when they go up and down a stairway. You will notice that many juvenile papers are vinyl coated, since manufacturers assume you will change the paper within a few years. Do yourself a favor and don't even consider this type of material for areas that get traffic or are exposed to water or grease.

Removability 3 to 7: Usually these types must be soaked but you can get lucky sometimes and pull the sheets dry. Vinyl coateds differ in how much vinyl was applied to the paper and this can result in very different soak times from brand to brand.

Plain Paper....or what many people in the trade call "Paper Papers." These are mostly British imports nowadays. They are matte in finish and there is no vinyl at all to them. They have no protection against staining. Most of them require a blankstock paper liner to prevent paste staining which can come from behind the paper. There's no doubt—these papers are beautiful...just know in advance that they are delicate. Grasscloth and String Papers also would fall into this category by default since they also contain no vinyl.

Plain paper removability 8 to 9: It must be soaked and scraped but usually they accept removal spray quickly.

Non Wovens (NWs) are being manufactured now to get the look of plain paper without the disadvantages of plain paper in terms of removability. The number one selling point to them is that they are strippable in the same way that Fabric Backed Vinyls are strippable....you pull on non wovens and you have stripped the room of old paper very quickly. Everybody loves a strippable wallcovering. It's true the NWs are more durable than plain paper and more washable than plain paper. They are also being sold as "mildew resistant" since they breathe extremely well, but his mildew resistance remains to be seen. We'll just have to wait a few years to see how the non wovens handle mildew. Just be aware that there are two varieties of non wovens—Unsealed Nonwoven (not a vinyl sheet and very porous) and Solid Vinyl Non Woven (a non woven sheet with a

watertight vinyl sheet on the surface).

For Baths and Kitchens I strongly recommend that you use Solid Vinyl Non Wovens.

Unsealed Non Wovens are actually more absorbent than plain paper. They also don't do well around stoves and kitchen grease . Solid Vinyl Non Wovens appear to be just as durable as Fabric Backed Vinyl which can last decades and the Unsealed Non Wovens could last just minutes around a three-year-old.

If you are buying a wallcovering and suspect that it may not be a sheet vinyl (since sample books rarely give this vital information) , get the sample book home and do the Litmus Test outlined below

Non Woven removability 8 to 10: Material is removable without water soaking and has the integrity to be pulled off in large pieces

In your local store, most times the books are not arranged by material type and you may have to be a sleuth to find out what you are actually buying. Ignore all labels on rolls that say “scrubbable” or “strippable” since they can be cruel jokes designed to dupe the unsuspecting. (Manufacturers say that everything is scrubbable and strippable and it's simply not true.) If you are searching for a fabric-backed material and the wallpaper store you are shopping at doesn't arrange their books by material type, start by asking for the “Textures” section of the store.

Don't expect the paper-backed vinyls to jump out at you either. Pattern books can say “solid vinyl”, “solid sheet vinyl”, or even “luxury vinyl” instead of making it easy for you by saying “paper-backed vinyl.” The vinyl-coated type usually just says “vinyl wallcovering.” Sometimes they don't say anything and you must rely on the abilities of the salesperson to steer you straight. If you don't have a knowledgeable salesperson at hand and you want to know if you are looking at some sort of sheet vinyl (fabric- or paper- backed or non woven material) do the following simple test:

The Litmus Test for Wallcovering Durability Anyone Can Do For Themselves.

Place a medium damp sponge on the pattern side of the wallcovering and let it sit there for 15-30 minutes. After the time has elapsed, turn the paper over and look at the backside. If there is any indication of warping, dampness, or darkness on the back side, the sample is not a sheet vinyl and I would not recommend it for a bath or kitchen. Next hold it up to a light and view it from the back side. Did it become more translucent in the area where the wet sponge was? Then the material is generally not suitable for kitchen and baths.