



## Caring for Vinyl Restaurant Furniture

Vinyl fabric is a common feature in restaurants, where it covers the benches of booths and the seats of bar stools and chairs, and even the edges of some tables. Vinyl is an attractive, practical fabric, but it does need to be cared for properly or the material can degrade. There are many products available to clean, protect, and condition vinyl, but these products need to be used correctly in order to be of use. Most particularly, vinyl conditioners need to be used within a context of proper care and cleaning or the conditioner itself cannot be as effective as it should be. It is also important to be clear on what vinyl is and what it is not, since vinyl is sometimes confused with other, outwardly similar materials, such as leather, that require different kinds of care. An overview on vinyl and the proper selection and use of vinyl conditioners should help restaurant owners keep their facilities at their best.

### What Is Vinyl?

Vinyl is a type of plastic made from ethylene and salt. The name is short for polyvinyl chloride, which is often abbreviated as PVC. PVC can be made into many types of material and can resemble leather, rubber, and even a lightweight version of ceramic. Usually, it is the leather-like fabric that is referred to as vinyl. Vinyl fabric has been used for furniture, car and boat interiors, and doll clothing. Vinyl is not usually used for human clothing because it does not breathe well. While vinyl furniture has been more popular in the past than it is now, vinyl furniture is still being made. Vinyl is popular for restaurant furniture because it looks good and is easy to clean. Because vinyl fabric is made to resemble leather, some people mistake vinyl for the more expensive and luxurious leather. When in doubt, look at the underside of the material; real leather is similar on both sides, while vinyl has a distinct backing.

### How to Care for Vinyl Furniture

Vinyl can be damaged by the ultraviolet radiation in sunlight, by excessive exposure to water, and by certain other chemicals, such as alcohol or harsh cleaning products. Vinyl fabric is somewhat porous and can absorb chemicals and dirt if these are not cleaned up promptly. The first step in caring for vinyl furniture is therefore to protect it from these kinds of damages. Careful restaurant planning can limit sun exposure, for example. Wipe up spills promptly, dust or vacuum regularly, and clean using a damp cloth with a little bit of dish soap or vinyl cleaner. Do not allow the surface to stay wet. Minor holes and tears can be repaired seamlessly using a vinyl repair kit. Using a vinyl conditioner once per month helps protect the material from damage and keeps it supple. Conditioning treatments can also be used to repair damage from improper care or neglect, at least up to a point.



## Conditioning Vinyl Restaurant Furniture

Conditioning is both a step in regular vinyl maintenance and a way to address damage caused by neglect. Choosing the right vinyl conditioner is important, especially given that leather conditioners are frequently advertised alongside vinyl conditioners, and not all of them are also intended for vinyl. For restaurants, when to condition vinyl can be as important a consideration as how to condition it, especially for those restaurants that are always open.

### Why Condition Vinyl?

When vinyl fabric is not cared for properly, it can become brittle due to chemical changes caused by ultraviolet light, certain chemicals, or even simply time. Brittle vinyl is not attractive, and it tears easily. Various conditioning products exist that restore the proper suppleness if degradation has not gone too far. Repeating the treatment every month or so, plus regular cleaning, keeps the vinyl in good condition. If the damage is too severe and the vinyl has already developed a lot of tears, it probably needs to be replaced. Minor tears can be repaired, but the vinyl has to be cleaned and reconditioned first in order for the repairs to be effective.

### How to Recondition Damaged Vinyl

Restaurant seats purchased second hand, or the furniture of a restaurant that has just changed ownership after a period of neglect, could be brittle, dirty, and even moldy. Obviously, the furniture must be reconditioned before it can be used. Begin with a thorough cleaning using a cloth dampened with either vinyl cleaner or a mixture of warm water and a little dish soap. Scrub a little with the cloth if necessary. Keep cleaning until the cloth comes away clean. If mildew or mold is present, it must be killed or it can grow back. Use a mixture of ammonia, hydrogen peroxide, and water and a soft brush to kill the mold or mildew and clean it away. Rinse thoroughly and dry completely. Once the vinyl is dry, spray on a vinyl conditioner treatment and rub it in with a clean cloth. Allow it to dry and repeat several times until the vinyl feels nice and supple again. Do not sit on or use the furniture until the conditioner dries completely. Excess conditioner can always be wiped away.



## Special Considerations for 24-Hour Restaurants

Because vinyl furniture cannot be used while it is drying, conditioning it presents special problems for the staff of restaurants that never close. Most restaurants do have quiet periods when few customers are expected and the staff has time and space for in-depth cleaning and other chores. Close off a small portion of the restaurant, such as one or two tables or booths or a section of the bar, during the daily lull and clean and condition all the vinyl within the closed off section. Once the conditioner is dry, another section can be done, time permitting. Depending on the size of the restaurant and how quiet it gets and for how long, it may be necessary to stretch the conditioning process out over many days. Even if a restaurant with 30 booths can only condition one booth per night, doing one every night would result in each booth being conditioned every month, which is the recommended timeframe. Check the product bottle to make sure its use cannot cause objectionable fumes.

## Choosing Vinyl Conditioners

There are several products popular for use on vinyl. Some of these are a bit controversial, with some people advocating their use and other people reporting actual damage. Part of the difficulty is that because PVC plastic takes so many forms and is used in so many contexts, it is easy to lump it in with other materials, such as rubber, painted metal, or leather. Products may be labeled for a particular use, such as car interiors, and may or may not be appropriate for vinyl. Products designed for vinyl can often damage other materials, while products designed for other materials, such as wax, can sometimes damage vinyl. There is also more than one grade of vinyl, and products appropriate for one kind of vinyl are not necessarily right for other kinds. Look on the ingredients list and the directions before buying, even if an acquaintance has recommended the brand. Avoid anything containing alcohol, as it can damage vinyl. There is some debate also over whether silicone is safe for vinyl or not. Choose a product labeled specifically for vinyl furniture, and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

## Conclusion

For a restaurant owner, the condition of the furniture is an important and often under-rated aspect of a properly run restaurant. When the furniture is in good condition, no one notices, unless the décor is exotic or notably glamorous, but if the furniture is uncomfortable, dirty, or damaged, it sends the message that the place is not well-run. No one wants to eat at a place that cannot take care of its chairs. In many restaurants, taking care of furniture means taking care of vinyl fabric, including routinely conditioning it. Conditioning vinyl fabric is a big part of taking care of this popular material, keeping it pliable and strong. But for conditioning to really work, it has to be done within a context of proper cleaning and appropriate protection from sunlight. Many restaurant owners, in addition to finding the right conditioning product and using it correctly, also have to find ways to work around the restaurant's long hours in order to find time for this type of maintenance. Keeping all the steps together is worth it, however, in order to keep the furniture looking its best.