

Hiring a Floor Finishing Contractor

Hiring a professional to sand and refinish your hardwood floors can add beauty and value to your home. As with any renovation, learn about risks before you choose a contractor.

Fire

Since 1995 more than 25 fires in Boston were caused by hardwood floor refinishing. These fires resulted in a property damage costing over \$1.5 million.

In 2004-2005, 3 floor refinishing workers burned to death in Somerville and Hull.

Some products used by some floor finishers, especially certain **lacquer sealers**, catch fire so easily that any spark (for example, from hitting a nail or rubbing a dry surface) can ignite the vapors even in cold temperatures. Vapors from these products can travel through a house and ignite any pilot light. Lacquer sealers are not necessary to produce a good floor finish.

Health Problems

Vapors from floor finishing can be unhealthy or just annoying for weeks after a job. Inhaling them might cause dizziness, headaches, or discomfort. Vapors from some products contain ingredients that may cause other health problems, such as allergies, in people who are exposed over time.

Questions to Ask a Contractor

1. "Can you use a water-based system?" Water-based (or "water-borne") products are less flammable and often less toxic than those based on oil or solvents. Water-based methods leave less annoying odor after a job, dry faster, and can produce a superior product. Some contractors don't have the skills to use these systems or mistakenly believe that they don't work as well. If a contractor refuses to use water-based products, this may indicate lack of safety knowledge.
2. "May I see the MSDSs for the products you use?" Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) list health and safety information. Check the **flash points** on MSDSs. A flash point lower than 100°F (38°C) means that the product is flammable and its vapors can catch fire easily at low temperatures. Less flammable products are available. If a contractor does not have MSDSs for all products this indicates a lack of safe practices.
3. "What do you do to prevent fires?" A prepared contractor will shut off all pilot lights in a house, close all unnecessary electric circuits, dispose of wood dust and stained rags immediately, and keep a fire extinguisher on hand. The best contractors use non-flammable products and dust containment systems on their equipment.
4. "May I see your workers' compensation and liability insurance information?" All contractors should have these and make them available.



**Dust Containment Systems
Can Help Prevent Fires**

For more information

The National Wood Flooring Association lists certified professionals at woodfloors.org
"Guide to Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS)": www.lehigh.edu/~kaf3/guides/msds.html

To learn about DOHI's work to make floor finishing safer, call MassCOSH at 617-825-SAFE or Viet-AID at 617-822-3717.