

Car Care Specialties, Inc

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TOLL FREE ORDER LINE (877) 796-8300 WWW.CARCAREONLINE.COM

Car Care Specialties Leather Care Update Newsletter

Maintaining the leather and vinyl components of your automotive interior are two very different processes. If you are using one product on both, that is somewhat like using gasoline as a lubricant. It will work, but not for long. I will cover the care and feeding of leather and vinyl in separate articles.

Leather seats are so comfortable because they wick away and absorb your perspiration whereas vinyl seats are impermeable and trap your perspiration between the seat and your body. This trapped perspiration super heats and causes that uncomfortable "clammy" feeling. Leather, having once been used to keep the insides of a cow from falling out was designed to pass moisture through tiny pores. These tiny pores absorb human perspiration and as the water evaporates, salts contained therein remain to absorb the essential oils in the leather. This accumulation of salts and other grunge should be cleaned from the leather about twice a year (more often if the seats get more than their fair share of your leftover sweat). The loss of oils within the leather is the first step to hardening, cracking and shrinkage. Leather dashes are very prone to this problem. Your dash is subjected to the destructive UV rays and heat concentrated by the windshield. The leather (or vinyl) of your dash rests upon a metal backing that acts like a frying pan. This "frying" drives the essential oils from the leather, causing premature shrinkage, cracking and hardening and generally turning it into a potato chip. Thus, a dash should be treated as often or even more often than the seats or door panels.



CLEANING: Cleaning leather is best accomplished by using a specifically designed, quality leather cleaner. Of all the products I have tried, my two favorites are Lexol pH Cleaner and Leather Therapy Wash. Both are pH balanced and effective yet gentle. These cleaners will re-hydrate the leftover salts and grime and wash them from the leather fibers. Use only leather products on leather, do not use vinyl or all purpose cleaners, as these products tend to be much too harsh for leather. I like to clean my leather in the Spring and Fall. Apply a small amount of your chosen cleaner to a damp applicator pad or damp 100% cotton cloth and work up a lather on the leather using gentle pressure. Clean the seat, dash or door panel a section at a time. If there are especially dirty areas, apply the cleaner with your applicator pad and then use a soft brush to gently lift the dirt from the pores of the leather. All cleaners should be thoroughly rinsed from the leather. I have tried spraying off with a hose, but that just seemed to fill the car with soapy water and I had to drill a hole in the floor to drain it out. (just kidding). I went back to using a bucket of clean water and a damp sponge. Rinse out the sponge, squeeze out the excess water and then wipe down the leather. Repeat this rinsing, squeezing and wiping until the foaming of the cleaner is gone. Dry the leather with a big fluffy towel and allow it to dry for about an hour.



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CONDITIONING: Once your leather is clean, you should restore the lost oils and emollients with a quality leather conditioner. Envision leather as a sponge. When the leather is new, the "sponge" is full of emollient oils and soft and pliable just like a wet sponge. Body salts, UV, heat and other factors leach the emollient oils from the "sponge", allowing the leather to shrink and become brittle. When leather becomes brittle, it will crack instead of bending just like a dry sponge will crack. A quality leather conditioner will help maintain the emollient oils in your leather. I have tested countless conditioners over the years and my favorite has been Lexol Leather Conditioner. It is easily absorbed into the leather fibers and leaves a non-greasy soft patina. A great new product that I am really starting to love is Leather Therapy Restorer & Conditioner that will maintain and even help restore slightly neglected leather. It penetrates deeply into the interior matrix of the leather to both preserve and soften. Zymol makes a product called "Leather Treat". It is an excellent, but expensive, leather conditioner with a slight coconut smell. One Grand Leather Conditioner is a petroleum-based conditioner that seems to work better on the American and Japanese leathers.



Apply a small amount of your chosen conditioner to an applicator pad or soft 100% cotton cloth and work gently into the leather, allow the conditioner to be absorbed into the fibers for several minutes and then buff off the excess. You may condition the leather as often as you wish. As a rule, condition your leather at least 4 to 6 times a year. The leather will tell you if you apply too much or apply too often as the leather fibers will just not absorb the excess. You do not have to clean leather every time you condition it, but you must condition it every time you clean it. Again, do not use a vinyl product as a conditioner on leather and above all avoid all raw silicone oil based products. The silicone oil will dissolve out the leather's natural oils and make the leather sticky and subject to UV damage. Silicone oil has a very high electrostatic attraction, so will invite every dust particle within miles to set up camp in your interior.

Almost all of the mass market leather products are loaded with raw silicone oil.

SLIGHTLY NEGLECTED LEATHER: If your seats or dash have been slightly neglected there are two great products to help restore the resiliency. Leather Therapy Restorer & Conditioner and Lexol Neatsfoot Formula will penetrate and help soften slightly neglected leather. Apply a small amount of either product to a soft applicator pad or 100% cotton cloth and apply a thin, even coat over the entire surface. Allow it to penetrate for a few minutes and then buff off the excess. Repeat this application every few days until the leather has regained its resiliency. Then return to your normal conditioning routine.

HARDENED LEATHER: If your leather has hardened or needs intensive softening, there is a really nifty product called Surflex Leather Soffener. This product is made from natural and synthetic oils that help restore a significant amount of the original softness to neglected leather. Clean the leather and then brush or wipe on a liberal coat of Soffener and cover tightly with Saran Wrap. Allow the Soffener to penetrate the leather for at least 72 hours. If the leather has absorbed the Soffener, apply another coat and recover with Saran Wrap. Depending upon the condition of the leather, it may require numerous additional applications. Stop the applications when the leather ceases to absorb the Soffener. Once the leather is sufficiently softened, allow it to "cure" uncovered for another 24 hours and then buff off any excess. You are done. I jokingly say this product will turn a dog's rawhide chew into a kid glove. I have had some luck with leather dashes with this method. Once the leather has softened, I have been able to gently tuck it back under the edges of the trim and windshield clips. This is a lot cheaper than a new dash and may be worth a try before spending a ton of money.

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SCUFFED LEATHER: If your leather or vinyl has scuffmarks, scratches or areas that the surface color has been removed, you may refinish it yourself. Most European seats are famous for scuffing on the left bolster of the driver's seat. This is usually caused by your belt loops as you get in and out of the seat. The key is



Surflex Colorant & Finish for Flexible Surfaces that may be matched to the exact color required. Any interior leather or vinyl surface may be refinished. It is not recommended to spot finish any area. If your seat bolsters have belt loop scuff marks, you should refinish the entire front of the seat. I usually dye from wetting to wetting. This provides a visual break that does not make the non-refinished areas appear quite as shabby. But then why not do the whole seat, dash, or door panel? Start by conditioning the leather to insure that the leather is fully hydrated with emollient oils. Once the leather is fully conditioned or softened, if needed, then clean the area(s) to be refinished with a P21S Total Auto Wash Citrus Degreaser. Spray the Total Auto Wash on a soft, lint free cloth and then wipe down the surface(s). Repeat after a few minutes. Rinse several times with a sponge and a bucket of clean water and allow the leather to dry thoroughly (at least 24 hours). The manufacturer of Surflex says to strip the old finish off using lacquer thinner, commercial paint remover or C-P Stripper. I don't,

because most interiors are not in that bad a shape and I have never found it necessary (They also recommend lightly sanding the area prior to usage, I never found the need to do that either). Mix the Surflex completely and apply with brush, spray it on with an air brush or apply it like a wood stain. I prefer to use a small piece of lint free cheese cloth to work the Surflex into the leather or vinyl just as if I were staining wood. Wear latex gloves otherwise your fingers will match your interior. Once the desired color of finish is achieved, allow to dry undisturbed for at least 24 hours. I allow the surface to "harden off" for about 6 weeks before applying any conditioners to leather or vinyl protectants to vinyl parts. I have not had a lot of luck refinishing dark leather to a significantly lighter color. The old color tends to show through in small "cracks" and the whole panel seems to be "muddy".

CUT & CRACKED LEATHER: Small cuts, cracks or holes in leather may be partially repaired using another Surflex product called Flex-Fill. This is a semi-flexible cosmetic filling material. You use it like a Spackle compound. It will take the Surflex colorant similar to leather or vinyl. I have been able to repair several small, scuffed areas and hide them so they are not visible to the casual observer. Will it make a three-inch crack in your dash look like new? No, but it may help hide it so that it isn't quite so obvious. I have found that forcing Flex-Fill under the repaired area of rigid materials and forming an inverted T patch works best. Flexible materials such as leather may require a patch glued to the underside to provide a backer for the Flex-Fill. Once the patch is dry, sand it lightly to blend in with the leather or vinyl. Clean the area thoroughly and refinish with the Surflex Colorant. This is a learned skill, so you should practice on a test piece of leather or vinyl. Perfect your techniques before you tackle your expensive interior.



If you have any questions or wish additional information, please call me at (201) 796-8300. You may also find additional how to articles on our website, www.carcareonline.com.

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