FIBERFACTS

When Pilling is the Problem...
Part Two

In the last *FIBERFACTS*, we looked at the specific fiber, yarn and fabric characteristics that contribute to the unsightly problem of pilling. Let's dig a little deeper and look at "real world" complaints.

One recent pilling issue reported by a client involved a cream-colored fabric on a sofa. The fabric was a blend: 60% rayon, 28% polyester and 12% cotton.

Within the first several weeks after delivery, the client noticed little lint-like balls of fibers clinging to the fabric on the seat cushions. By the end of the third month, the problem had become even more obvious. The little pills were picking up darker fibers from other fabrics, making them look even worse. The sofa was still essentially brand new, but it was looking more like someone's old sweater.

Neither the designer nor the client had ever seen anything like this. When everyone else threw up their hands, the designer called Fiber-Seal.

Fabric Testing

The Joint Industry Fabric Standards Committee of the American Home Furnishings Alliance states: "There is no acceptable test method for pilling of woven and knit upholstery fabrics that is suitable for direct comparison to actual use.



Excessive in-use pilling is nonetheless undesirable." What does this mean? It means that nobody has yet come up with a laboratory test method that successfully reproduces the very complicated phenomenon called pilling.

There are, however, test methods that at least attempt to predict a fabric's susceptibility to pilling. The most widely used pilling test in the field of upholstery fabrics is called the Brush Pilling test. In this test, a sample of the fabric in question is mounted on the platform of a machine and is rubbed against a brush to create surface fuzzing. The fabric is then rubbed face-to-face against a second piece of fabric to create pills. Once the test is finished, the fabric is rated according to a set of photographs showing various degrees of pilling. A score of "5" means no pilling and a "1" indicates severe pilling.



Brush Pilling Test

Going back to the sofa pilling complaint, a yard of the fabric was ordered and a sample was sent to an independent test lab for the Brush Pilling evaluation. The fabric rated a 2.3 (moderate pilling) on the scale of 1 through 5.

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This showed that the fabric was likely to be susceptible to pilling.

So, you might guess that the fabric was replaced, right?

Not So Fast

In virtually every fabric/furniture warranty we have ever read, pilling is described as a natural phenomenon… and it is therefore specifically not considered a fabric defect.

We don't blame companies for their hesitancy to cover pilling as a defect. This is one of those problems that is very hard to solve, especially without a test method that is proven to reliably predict pilling issues.

Options for Correction

There is no way to prevent pilling. It really comes down to the best methods for removing the pills once they have formed. When a fabric starts to exhibit pilling, we think the most effective correction is shaving.



An inexpensive, battery-operated fabric shaver (available in most home stores as well as big box retailers) is our tool of choice. Simply place the head of the shaver *lightly* against the surface of the fabric and pass it back and forth over pilled areas. It can be somewhat tedious, but in almost all cases this method is very effective.

We caution you to avoid pumice stones and similar devices. These methods actually pull on the pills to help break them free, potentially causing more fibers to work loose on the surface of the fabric. Loose fibers are how the problem started in the first place!

We are often asked if shaving is the ultimate answer for pilling. Does it have to be repeated? Unfortunately, the answer is very often "yes." Hopefully, the pilling will continue to diminish over time. There is absolutely no reason to expect that the pilling/shaving will significantly diminish the strength or the useful life of the fabric.

Do Fabric Protection Treatments Cause Pilling?

We can't speak for other treatments, but as for ours: Absolutely Not.

Fiber-Seal Systems has studied the issue of pilling very carefully over the years, submitting several different fabrics for side-by-side testing of treated versus untreated samples. In every test, the fabric treated by Fiber-Seal has scored the same as -- or slightly better than – the untreated fabric. Hence, our unequivocal statement: **Fiber-Seal treatment does not cause, nor does it prevent or improve, pilling on upholstery fabrics.**

Got A Question?

We always appreciate inquiries about fibers, fabric performance and similar subjects. If you have comments or questions, please feel free to contact us!

Designer's Corner

Have you visited **www.FiberSeal.com** to see what's new? Lots of great information can be found in Designers' Corner, including back issues of *FIBERFACTS*!

You can also follow us on one of the links below.

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