

What to Do about Salt Stains?

Rain, snow, and slush on streets and sidewalks: the footwear salt stain season is upon us. Why do salt stains appear and what can we do about them?

Salt stains and visible stains in general can appear on footwear for a variety of reasons. One is an excessively high salt content in upper and lining leathers. This phenomenon can also occur in shoes with leather insoles and soles. Therefore the leathers used should not have too high a content of leachable substances.

Yet it is not always the leather that is responsible for the occurrence of such stains. Textile linings may occasionally also give rise to stains on upper leather, generally as a result of excessive amounts of residual sizing agents*. Material defects are therefore responsible for the ugly stains in the cases described.

Another reason for salt stains lies in excessive perspiration of the foot. Feet in shoes having purely synthetic lining and sole materials which cannot be described as “breathable” can readily perspire excessively. In winter, moreover, road salt can also give rise to “classical” salt stains.

Appropriate Salt Stain Removal

The recommended method for removing salt stains of all kinds is to hold the footwear under running water and remove the salt stains thoroughly with a soft brush. The footwear should then be completely dried and treated with a care product.

Under no circumstances should the salt stain be smeared with shoe polish – which is a commonly observed error. This will lead to a salt crust, making the shoe unsightly. Moreover, this crust can then hardly be removed because the normally water-soluble salt is protected from water by the generally water-repelling care product. Water no longer has any chance of dissolving the salt.

** Sizing agents are auxiliary agents used in textile production. Applied to textile fibres by spraying or dipping, they coat the surface of the fibres with a smooth film and thus impart suppleness and strength to the material. This facilitates weaving and reduces the danger of the warp thread breaking. Wheat flour and glue were formerly used as sizes. Nowadays sizing agents are chemical products such as poly(vinyl acetate), polyacrylates, or sodium carboxymethylcellulose. After weaving the size is removed by washing because it would interfere with further processing. It is even recycled in modern textile factories (sources: en.wikipedia.org and www.drpetry.de).*

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