

Pennsylvania Laminate Flooring Buying White Paper

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How to Choose the Right Laminate Flooring for Your Home, Lifestyle, and Budget

Introduction

Choosing new laminate flooring involves more than finding a wood color that looks good in a showroom.

The right floor can influence durability, maintenance, comfort, room appearance, installation cost, and how well the flooring performs under everyday household traffic. Modern laminate flooring has changed considerably from many of the products homeowners may remember from years ago. Today's better laminate floors can offer realistic wood visuals, embossed textures, improved locking systems, stronger surface protection, and enhanced resistance to spills and everyday wear.

This white paper is designed as a practical buying guide for Pennsylvania homeowners considering laminate flooring.

It explains laminate construction, abrasion ratings, water resistance, waterproof laminate, plank thickness, installation requirements, subfloor preparation, project costs, and how to select flooring based on pets, children, kitchens, basements, high-traffic rooms, and other real-world considerations.

Whether you are replacing worn flooring, updating a family room, remodeling a kitchen, finishing a basement, or preparing a home for resale, understanding the differences between laminate products can help you make a more informed decision.

Why Laminate Flooring Is Worth Considering

Laminate flooring remains a popular choice because it can combine the appearance of hardwood with practical performance and a wide range of price points.

Realistic Wood Appearance

Modern printing and surface-texturing technology allow laminate flooring to reproduce the appearance of oak, hickory, maple, walnut, and other wood species.

Many products include:

- Natural-looking grain patterns
- Embossed surface texture
- Matte or low-sheen finishes
- Beveled plank edges
- Color variation between planks
- Wide and long plank formats

Higher-quality laminate can create a convincing wood-floor appearance when viewed across an entire room.

Surface Durability

One of laminate flooring's strengths is its protective wear surface.

Depending on the product, laminate can perform well against:

- Foot traffic
- Pet movement
- Children's toys
- Chair movement
- Everyday scuffs
- Minor scratches
- General household wear

No flooring is completely scratch-proof or damage-proof, but a properly selected laminate floor can be a practical choice for active households.

Design Flexibility

Laminate is available in styles ranging from traditional hardwood visuals to lighter contemporary finishes.

Popular design directions include:

- Natural oak
- White oak
- Warm brown wood tones
- Gray and greige finishes
- Rustic plank visuals
- Wide-plank designs
- Low-variation flooring
- High-variation wood looks

This variety allows laminate to work in older Pennsylvania homes as well as newer construction and remodeled interiors.

Easier Routine Maintenance

Most laminate floors are relatively easy to maintain.

Regular care generally includes:

- Sweeping
- Vacuuming with an appropriate floor attachment
- Removing grit and debris
- Cleaning spills promptly
- Using manufacturer-approved cleaning products

Laminate does not require sanding, refinishing, or waxing like some traditional flooring materials.

Understanding How Laminate Flooring Is Made

Not all laminate flooring is constructed the same way.

Understanding the basic layers can make product comparisons easier.

Wear Layer

The top surface helps protect the floor against scratches, scuffs, stains, and everyday wear. The performance of this layer is an important consideration in active rooms.

Decorative Layer

The decorative layer contains the printed image that creates the wood or other design appearance.

The quality of the image, pattern variation, and printing process can significantly affect how realistic the finished floor looks.

Core Layer

The core gives the plank structure and stability.

Many laminate floors use a high-density fiberboard core.

Core construction can affect:

- Plank stability
- Locking performance
- Moisture resistance
- Impact resistance
- Overall product feel

Backing Layer

The backing layer helps stabilize the plank and support the overall construction. Some laminate products may also include an attached pad or underlayment.

What AC Ratings Mean

The Abrasion Class, commonly called the AC rating, is one of the specifications homeowners may encounter when comparing laminate flooring.

AC ratings generally indicate a product's resistance to wear.

AC1

Designed for very light residential use.

These products are less common for major flooring projects.

AC2

Suitable for light residential traffic.

Potential applications may include lower-use bedrooms or similar spaces.

AC3

Designed for general residential use and some light commercial applications.

AC3 laminate is commonly considered for:

- Living rooms
- Bedrooms
- Dining rooms
- Hallways
- Family rooms

AC4

Designed for heavier residential use and moderate commercial traffic.

AC4 products may be worth considering for:

- Busy households
- Entryways
- High-traffic hallways
- Homes with children
- Homes with pets

- Home offices with frequent use

AC5

Designed for heavier commercial environments.

A higher AC rating does not automatically mean a product is the best choice for every home.

The goal is to match the flooring to the expected traffic and use of the room.

Laminate Thickness: Does Thicker Mean Better?

Laminate flooring is available in different thicknesses.

Common thicknesses may include:

- 7 mm
- 8 mm
- 10 mm
- 12 mm

Some products include attached padding that may affect the advertised overall thickness.

A thicker laminate plank may provide:

- A more substantial feel
- Improved sound characteristics
- Stronger locking profiles
- Better resistance to minor subfloor irregularities

However, thickness alone does not determine flooring quality.

Homeowners should also compare:

- AC rating
- Core construction

- Locking system
- Moisture protection
- Surface texture
- Edge construction
- Warranty
- Manufacturer installation requirements

A well-constructed 8 mm product may be a better choice than a poorly constructed thicker product.

Waterproof Laminate and Water-Resistant Laminate

Moisture performance has become an important part of the laminate flooring market.

However, homeowners should understand the terminology.

Water-Resistant Laminate

Water-resistant laminate is designed to provide some protection against spills and surface moisture.

The amount of protection varies by product.

Manufacturers may specify how quickly spills must be cleaned.

Waterproof Laminate

Some manufacturers market laminate collections as waterproof.

These products may use:

- Moisture-resistant cores
- Tighter locking systems
- Protected plank edges
- Specialized surface treatments
- Installation systems designed to reduce water penetration

The exact waterproof warranty can differ significantly between products.

Read the Actual Water Warranty

Do not rely only on the word "waterproof" displayed on a sample.

Review:

- How the manufacturer defines waterproof
- Whether there is a time limit for standing water
- Which rooms are approved
- Whether perimeter sealing is required
- Whether bathroom installation is permitted
- Whether pet accidents are covered
- What installation methods are required

The exact warranty language matters.

Waterproof Flooring Does Not Fix a Moisture Problem

Even waterproof laminate should not be used to hide:

- Foundation leaks
- Basement seepage
- Plumbing leaks
- Wet concrete
- Mold
- Excessive slab moisture
- Flooding conditions

Moisture underneath the flooring can still create problems in the building.

Choosing Laminate Flooring for Homes With Pets

Pets can change flooring priorities.

Pet-friendly laminate flooring should be evaluated for:

- Scratch resistance
- Surface texture
- Traction
- Moisture protection
- Ease of cleaning
- Color variation
- Sheen level

Scratch Visibility

A darker, highly uniform floor may show pet hair and minor surface marks more readily.

Floors with moderate grain variation and texture can sometimes be more forgiving visually.

Traction

Very smooth flooring may be difficult for some dogs.

A lightly textured surface can provide a different feel underfoot.

Pet Accidents and Water Bowls

If pet accidents or spilled water bowls are a concern, moisture performance should be carefully reviewed.

Water-resistant and waterproof claims should be verified for the exact product.

Routine Pet Care Matters

Keeping pet nails trimmed and removing tracked-in grit can help reduce visible wear.

Choosing Laminate Flooring for Homes With Children

Busy family homes often need flooring that can handle repeated daily use.

Important considerations include:

- Abrasion resistance
- Scratch resistance
- Easy cleanup
- Moisture protection
- Comfortable appearance
- Color variation
- Maintenance requirements

Family rooms, hallways, play areas, and kitchens may experience:

- Toys
- Food spills
- Shoes
- Chairs
- School bags
- Sports equipment
- Frequent cleaning

A stronger residential laminate product may be worth considering for these spaces.

The floor should also fit the household's normal cleaning routine.

A product requiring unusually specialized care may not be the best choice for a busy family.

Laminate Flooring for Kitchens

Laminate flooring can create a continuous wood-look appearance through kitchens and adjoining living areas.

Kitchen flooring must deal with:

- Spills
- Chair movement
- Food debris
- Pet bowls
- Frequent traffic

- Repeated cleaning

Moisture Performance Is Important

For a kitchen installation, review the product's water-resistance or waterproof specifications.

Ask whether the manufacturer requires:

- Perimeter sealing
- Special expansion details
- Approved transition methods
- Specific cleaning procedures

Consider Cabinets and Countertops

The flooring should be viewed alongside:

- Cabinet color
- Countertops
- Backsplash
- Wall paint
- Nearby hardwood
- Existing trim

A sample that looks neutral in a showroom may reveal warm, cool, gray, or yellow undertones in the kitchen.

Think About the Entire Open Space

Many Pennsylvania homes have kitchens that open into family rooms or dining areas. Plank direction and visual flow should be considered across the entire connected area.

Laminate Flooring for Basements

Finished basements are a common flooring project in Pennsylvania.

Laminate may be an option, but basement conditions should be evaluated carefully.

Start With Moisture History

Before selecting flooring, consider:

- Previous water intrusion
- Foundation seepage
- Sump pump history
- Plumbing issues
- Concrete moisture
- Seasonal dampness

The fact that a basement is dry today does not necessarily describe its entire moisture history.

Check Product Approval

Confirm that the laminate product is approved for below-grade installation.

Review the manufacturer's requirements for:

- Concrete slabs
- Moisture testing
- Vapor barriers
- Underlayment
- Expansion space

Floor Flatness Matters

Basement concrete may contain:

- High areas
- Low areas
- Cracks
- Patches
- Uneven transitions

Floating laminate flooring needs a subfloor that meets the manufacturer's flatness requirements.

Floor preparation should be addressed before installation.

Laminate Flooring for Bathrooms

Bathroom laminate requires careful product selection.

Not every laminate floor is approved for bathroom installation.

If laminate is being considered for a bathroom, review:

- Manufacturer bathroom approval
- Waterproof warranty
- Perimeter sealing requirements
- Toilet installation details
- Vanity transitions
- Tub and shower edges
- Expansion requirements

Powder rooms may present different moisture conditions than full bathrooms with showers or tubs.

The exact product and installation instructions should guide the decision.

Do not assume that every product labeled waterproof is automatically suitable for every bathroom.

Scratch-Resistant Laminate Flooring

Laminate flooring is often chosen because of its surface durability.

However, scratch-resistant does not mean scratch-proof.

Potential causes of surface damage include:

- Grit
- Sand
- Furniture movement
- Metal chair legs
- Heavy objects
- Pet nails
- Improper cleaning tools

Look at the Surface Finish

Texture and sheen can affect how visible minor marks appear.

A high-gloss floor may show certain marks more readily than a matte or textured finish.

Use Entry Mats

Grit tracked into the home can act like sandpaper under shoes.

Entry mats and regular cleaning can reduce abrasive debris.

Protect Furniture

Felt pads should be used under furniture legs.

Heavy furniture should be lifted rather than dragged.

The Importance of Seeing Laminate Samples in Your Home

Flooring can look dramatically different under different lighting conditions.

A showroom may use:

- Bright overhead lighting
- Cool LED lighting
- Large open displays

Your home may have:

- Natural sunlight
- Warm lamps
- Limited windows
- Dark cabinetry
- Painted trim
- Existing wood finishes

View Samples During the Day and Evening

A laminate floor can appear warmer or cooler depending on the light.

Check samples:

- Near windows
- In shaded areas
- Beside cabinets
- Against baseboards
- Near adjoining floors
- Under evening lighting

Look at More Than One Plank

A single sample may not show the complete color and pattern variation.

Whenever possible, view several planks together.

This provides a better idea of how the floor may look across hundreds of square feet.

Laminate Flooring Installation: What Homeowners Should Expect

Installation quality can influence the appearance and performance of the floor.

Measuring the Space

The project should begin with accurate measurements.

Measurements help determine:

- Material quantity
- Waste allowance
- Transition needs
- Room layout
- Plank direction

Reviewing the Existing Floor

The installer should consider:

- Existing flooring
- Subfloor type
- Floor flatness
- Moisture conditions
- Door clearances
- Adjoining flooring heights

Subfloor Preparation

Laminate flooring generally requires a subfloor that is:

- Clean
- Dry
- Stable
- Properly prepared
- Within manufacturer flatness requirements

Uneven subfloors can contribute to:

- Movement
- Clicking
- Joint stress
- Visible flex
- Locking-system problems

Expansion Space

Laminate is typically installed as a floating floor.

The flooring needs room to expand and contract.

Manufacturer-required expansion space should be maintained around:

- Walls
- Cabinets
- Doorways
- Columns
- Fixed objects

Plank Layout

The first few rows can influence the appearance of the entire room.

Installers may consider:

- Plank direction
- Starting wall
- End-row width
- Stagger pattern
- Doorway transitions
- Sight lines

Layout planning is especially important in open floor plans and connected rooms.

Laminate Underlayment

Underlayment can serve several purposes.

Depending on the product and installation, it may provide:

- Sound reduction

- Cushioning
- Moisture protection
- Support for the floating floor

Some laminate flooring includes attached underlayment.

Other products require a separate underlayment.

Do Not Automatically Add Extra Padding

If a product already has an attached pad, adding additional underlayment may not be permitted.

Too much cushioning can potentially affect the locking system.

Always follow the manufacturer's installation instructions.

Laminate Flooring Installation Costs

The cost of a laminate flooring project includes more than the plank price.

Potential project costs include:

- Flooring material
- Underlayment
- Old floor removal
- Disposal
- Subfloor preparation
- Moisture testing
- Installation labor
- Trim
- Quarter round
- Transitions
- Stair work
- Furniture moving
- Delivery
- Waste material

Compare Complete Project Estimates

Two flooring estimates may appear very different because they include different work.

One estimate may include:

- Old flooring removal
- Floor preparation
- Furniture moving
- Trim

Another may quote only material and basic installation.

Ask for a clear project scope before comparing prices.

The Lowest Material Price May Not Produce the Lowest Project Cost

An inexpensive laminate floor may still require the same:

- Removal
- Preparation
- Labor
- Trim
- Transitions

Material price should be considered as one part of the complete project.

Common Laminate Flooring Buying Mistakes

Choosing From a Small Sample

A single plank may not show pattern variation or the complete visual character of the floor.

Selecting by Color Alone

The floor must also match the room's traffic, moisture conditions, and maintenance needs.

Assuming All Waterproof Laminate Is the Same

Water warranties and installation requirements can differ.

Ignoring the AC Rating

The expected traffic level should be considered when comparing products.

Focusing Only on Thickness

Thickness is one product characteristic, not a complete measure of quality.

Skipping Subfloor Evaluation

Floor preparation can affect both appearance and performance.

Forgetting About Transitions

Doorways and adjoining floors should be considered before installation begins.

Using the Same Flooring Logic for Every Room

A bedroom, kitchen, basement, and commercial office may have very different flooring requirements.

Comparing Incomplete Estimates

A low estimate may simply exclude work included in another proposal.

Maintaining Laminate Flooring

Laminate is generally easy to maintain when cared for properly.

Remove Grit Regularly

Sweep or vacuum to remove dirt and abrasive debris.

Clean Spills Promptly

Even with water-resistant or waterproof products, prompt cleanup is a good habit.

Use Approved Cleaning Products

Follow manufacturer recommendations.

Avoid assuming that a cleaner labeled for wood floors is automatically appropriate for laminate.

Avoid Excessive Water

Do not flood the floor during cleaning unless the manufacturer specifically permits that cleaning method.

Protect Furniture

Use felt pads under chairs, tables, and other furniture.

Use Entry Mats

Mats can reduce tracked-in moisture and grit.

Follow the Product Warranty

Keep the manufacturer's care and maintenance instructions.

Improper cleaning products or methods may affect warranty coverage.

When Should Laminate Flooring Be Replaced?

Laminate flooring may need replacement when homeowners begin seeing:

- Significant wear paths
- Extensive scratches

- Chipped plank edges
- Swollen joints
- Water damage
- Plank separation
- Repeated locking-system failure
- Soft or uneven areas
- Major discoloration
- An appearance that no longer fits the home

Before replacing the floor, determine whether the problem involves the flooring itself or an underlying condition.

Moisture, subfloor movement, or installation problems should be addressed before new flooring is installed.

Can New Laminate Flooring Improve Home Appeal?

Updated flooring can change how a home feels.

New laminate flooring may help:

- Refresh outdated rooms
- Create visual continuity
- Brighten darker interiors
- Modernize kitchens and living areas
- Improve resale presentation
- Make rooms feel cleaner
- Reduce visible flooring wear

Flooring does not always produce a dollar-for-dollar return on investment.

However, worn, damaged, or severely outdated floors can influence how buyers perceive a home.

A well-selected laminate floor can create a cleaner and more move-in-ready appearance.

A Practical Laminate Flooring Buying Checklist

Before selecting laminate flooring, consider the following:

- Which room is being remodeled?
- How much daily traffic does the room receive?
- Are pets in the home?
- Are children in the home?
- Is moisture a concern?
- Is the product approved for the intended room?
- What is the AC rating?
- What is the plank thickness?
- Does the product include attached underlayment?
- What does the water warranty actually cover?
- Have you viewed several planks together?
- Have you viewed the sample in your home?
- What subfloor preparation is required?
- Where will transitions be installed?
- What is included in the installation estimate?
- What cleaning products does the manufacturer recommend?
- What does the product warranty exclude?

The best laminate floor is not necessarily the most expensive product or the floor with the longest feature list.

It is the flooring that best matches the room, household, project conditions, and budget.

Conclusion

Laminate flooring can be a practical and attractive choice for Pennsylvania homeowners. Modern laminate products offer realistic wood visuals, durable wear surfaces, a broad range of styles, and increasingly sophisticated moisture-resistant and waterproof options.

The key is understanding that laminate flooring products are not interchangeable.

Homeowners should compare product construction, AC rating, thickness, moisture performance, surface texture, locking system, installation requirements, warranty terms, and total project cost.

Room conditions also matter.

A busy family room may require different flooring priorities than a bedroom. A kitchen requires careful attention to spills and cleaning. A basement requires moisture and subfloor evaluation. Homes with pets may place greater emphasis on scratch visibility, traction, and cleanup.

An informed flooring decision begins with the home and the way the room is actually used. From there, homeowners can compare appropriate laminate products, view samples in their own lighting, understand the installation scope, and choose flooring with greater confidence.

If you are considering laminate flooring for your Pennsylvania home, an in-home consultation can help you compare samples under your actual lighting, evaluate room conditions, discuss installation requirements, and better understand the complete project before making a final decision.