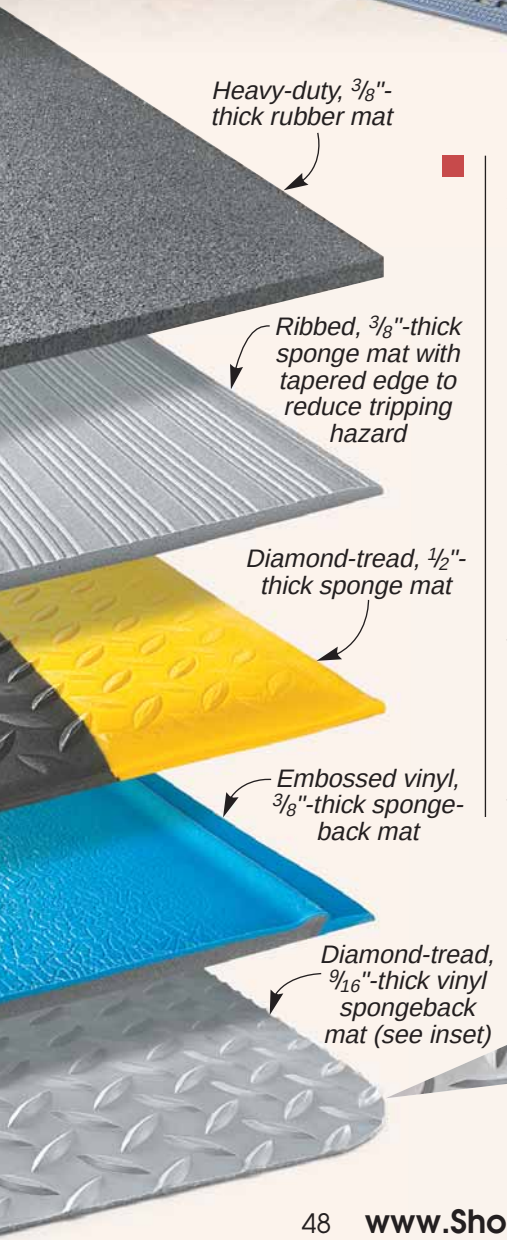
add comfort with Shop Mats

Enjoy working on a concrete floor. All you need is an anti-fatigue mat.



There's nothing like spending a nice long weekend in the shop. But if your shop floor is a cold, hard slab of concrete like mine, you probably end up with more than a finished project — like sore feet and legs, along with an aching back. Let's face it. Concrete is a hard and unforgiving surface.

What's the Solution? Working on a concrete floor might seem like something you just have to "tough out." You can't easily tear it out or cover it all with a "softer" surface.

But there's a quick and easy solution — an anti-fatigue mat like the ones you see on this page. (For sources, see page 51.) These inexpensive mats are designed to place a barrier between you and the floor to reduce the fatigue associated with working on concrete.

A World of Choices. The mats shown here are just a few of the dozens available. So you'll want to be sure to keep in mind a few things before you add one (or two) to your shop.

MAT MATERIAL

The first thing you'll need to do is decide between a solid rubber mat or a mat made from a sponge-like material.

Rubber Mats. Solid rubber mats are very common (top photo in margin). They're heavy-duty, so they'll take a lot of abuse. Often made from recycled tires, rubber mats provide a cushioned surface that's impact resistant. So a dropped chisel or tool won't do much damage — to the mat or the tool. Another plus: rubber resists most oils and finishes that might get spilled on it.

Sponge Mats. You'll also find mats made of a sponge-like (foam) material (the second and third mats at left). A sponge mat provides more cushion than a rubber mat, but it does have one problem. It doesn't wear as well.

To solve this problem, many manufacturers make a combination version called a spongeback mat (lower two mats in margin). Here, a top layer of vinyl or rubber is bonded to the foam underneath. While still providing a nice cushion, these mats are more durable. And it's why I like them best.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While the type of material the mat is made from is important, you'll also need to consider the size of the mat, its thickness, and even the texture on the surface.

Sizing a Mat. Getting as large a mat as possible seems like a good idea. This way, you could cover as much of the concrete floor as possible. But bigger isn't always better.

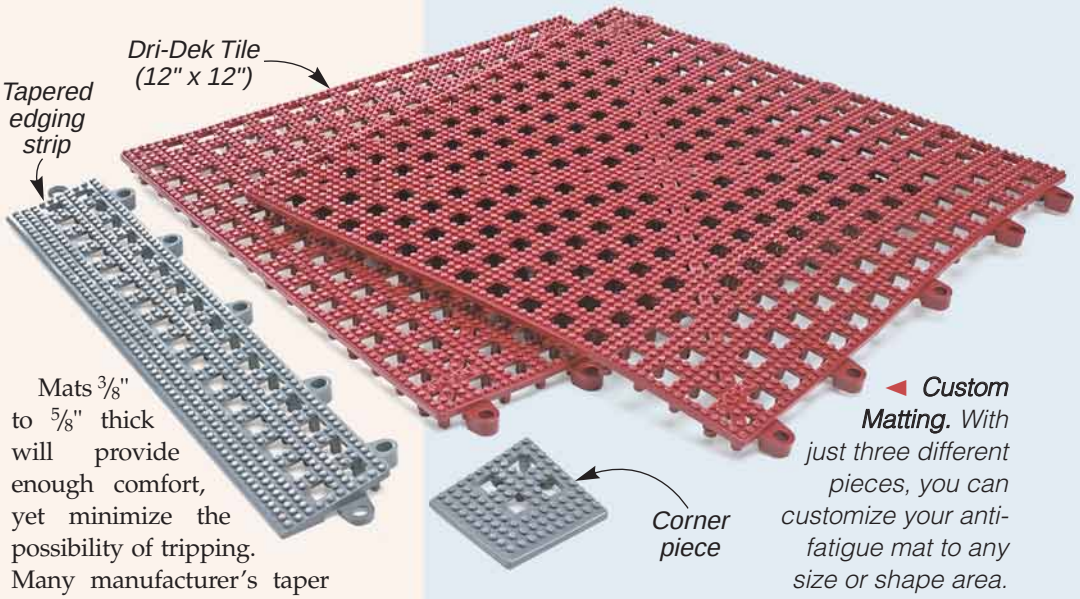
At roughly $2 to $4 a square foot, covering a large area would be costly — assuming you could find a mat large enough. And second, covering an entire shop with a "soft" material makes moving tools and equipment around the shop just about impossible.

The best thing to do is size the mat (or mats) to cover the areas where you stand and work the most. For me, that's at the front of my table saw and workbench. I like the mats to extend about 1' to each side and behind the area I work in. In most cases, a 3' x 4' mat is just about the right size.

There are times when a standard-size mat just won't fit the area you have to work in. A solution to that is to create a custom mat. For that, check out the box at right.

How Thick? Another consideration is the thickness of the mat. Just like the overall size, a thicker mat isn't always better.

Sure, a thicker mat will have more "cush," but it can actually increase fatigue and be a hazard. Why? A thicker mat makes you feel less stable, so you end up swaying and shifting your feet more often as you work. And the extra thickness is a tripping hazard.



◀ *Custom Matting. With just three different pieces, you can customize your anti-fatigue mat to any size or shape area.*

Mats 3/8" to 5/8" thick will provide enough comfort, yet minimize the possibility of tripping. Many manufacturer's taper the edges as well to reduce the hazard (see opposite page).

A Little Texture. Besides the taper, most mats will have a textured surface to help prevent slipping. A little texture is nice, but I've found that too much can make it hard to sweep the mat clean.

Beat the Cold. One last thing. Concrete stays cold a long time. And most mats will provide some insulation. But if you expect to spend a lot of time working in the shop during cold weather, you might want to take a look at the *Footwarmer* shop mat shown below.

The *Footwarmer* has a built-in heating element. So no matter how cold it is, the mat radiates a constant heat to keep you more comfortable.

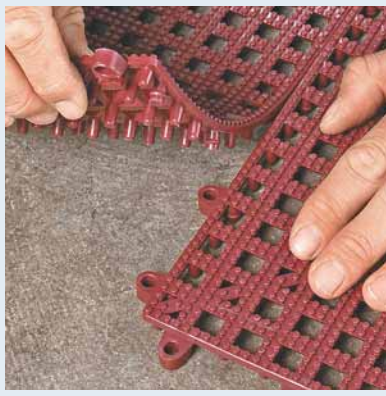
The *Footwarmer* comes in two sizes, but the larger model (FWB-16x36) works best at a bench, like you see in the photo below.

Cushioned Warmth. *Beat the fatigue and cold with a heated shop mat that simply plugs in.*

Customized Mats: Dri-Dek Tiles

One of the more interesting anti-fatigue products available is the snap-together tile and trim pieces shown above. *Dri-Dek* tiles are ideal for any place you need to have a customized, anti-fatigue mat.

Each 12"-square, vinyl tile has close to 300 flexible legs that absorb the shock of walking on a concrete floor, see photo at right. As you can see in the main photo on the opposite page, the tiles can be snapped together to fit around any arrangement of tools, benches, or cabinets in your workshop. And the open grid allows sawdust and chips to fall right through. Cleaning up is just a matter of rolling back the mat and then vacuuming everything up.



▲ ***Snap Together.*** *Mating pins and tabs secure the tiles to each other as well as the edging and corner pieces.*

The tiles do stand off the floor about 1/2". To provide a smooth transition around the outside edge of the mat, you can snap on tapered edge strips and corner pieces (top photo). One final plus, all the pieces are available in 12 different colors, so it's an easy way to add a little pizazz to your shop as well.

The only real downside to *Dri-Dek* is the cost. The tiles run a little under $4 apiece, with the edging ($2) and corners ($1) just a bit less. So a 3' x 4' mat with edging and corners strips will cost about $72 (about $25 more than a similar rubber or sponge mat). For sources, refer to page 51.