

Mildew Prevention and Treatment

No matter how carefully maintained, every boat is a target for a case of mildew. What causes mildew and what are the most sensible ways to prevent and treat it?



Mildew needs five things to grow and flourish: A food source, a temperature range comfortable to humans, moisture, darkness, and stagnant (unmoving) air. Once you break the process of any of these, mildew will have difficulty growing.

Mildew is a form of fungus present everywhere in the world. It is a primitive plant form that feeds on the other plants and produces microscopic, seed-like spores that float freely. It takes dark, damp conditions to encourage their growth. Those conditions are found on a boat.

Synthetic boat cover fabrics do not support the growth of mildew. Natural boat cover fabrics (those containing cotton) can support the growth of mildew, but such fabrics are treated with mildew inhibitors that will, with proper care, typically outlast the warranty period of the cover. However, dirt, pollen, and other environmental particles that embed between the fibers of any boat cover fabric are gourmet fare for mildew and therefore, no boat cover fabric can prevent mildew from growing.

Prevention should become first priority since mildew is easier to prevent than eliminate.

An essential boat-keeping chore should be regular cleaning of the interior, especially prior to boat cover installation. Any form of dirt (food crumbs, suntan lotion, pollen, etc.) can become a foothold for mildew.

Provide good ventilation under the cover. Utilize boat cover accessories such as vents, which are invaluable in improving air circulation and allowing moisture from condensation to escape.

Mildew cannot survive in light and heat, so take wet gear out of your boat and spread it in the sun before stowing. Expose all sides to the sunlight and turn items like life jackets inside-out for full effect. Allow your boat to dry in the sun before installing your cover.

Silica gel and activated alumina are porous granules that absorb up to half their weight in moisture from the atmosphere and can be purchased inexpensively at hardware stores. Use a double thickness of nylon stocking as a container, and hang suspended in the boat, under the cover. These products can be reused after drying for about an hour in a 300 degree vented oven.

Even the best preventative measures sometimes are not enough and you have to rid your boat of mildew. Start with a complete cleaning of the boat's interior. Avoid strong laundry detergents since phosphates are a delicacy for mildew. Use low-phosphate soap for normal scrubbing and mild alkali, such as washing soda or trisodium phosphate for stubborn mildew. Be sure to rinse the area thoroughly.

Most remedies rely on sodium hypochlorite (household bleach) to remove mildew. A good, strong, all-around solution is ½ cup household bleach per gallon of water. Do not use liquid detergents in combination with bleaches. Scrub the affected surfaces with a soft brush, using rubber gloves and eye protection. Rinse thoroughly.

For cleaning our boat covers and bimini top canvas, we highly recommend 303 Fabric & Vinyl Cleaner which is safe and effective. Be aware that repeated cleanings can diminish the water repellency of certain marine canvas. To restore water repellency to factory-new levels, we highly recommend 303 Fabric Guard. For more information, please visit our website, www.carvercovers.com or www.goldeagle.com/brands/303-products/.

Remember that anything used to kill or remove mildew will wash or wear away over time, so be prepared for repeated treatments as part of your maintenance routine.