

The Need for Caulk Removal

Many silicone caulking products are guaranteed for 20 years or more, but excessive moisture, mold and movements of the substrate can cause them to fail prematurely. When they do, they form an imperfect seal and can also create an eyesore, especially if blackened by mold. It isn't enough to simply remove the damaged part of the caulk if you want to repair it with fresh material. Any caulk that you leave on the substrate will prevent the new caulk from adhering. Moreover, if any of the old caulk is moldy, the mold will continue to grow on the new caulk.

Bulk Removal

No solvent dissolves silicone caulk, so you won't find a chemical agent in the hardware store that will allow you to wipe away the caulk after brushing it on. Mineral spirits will soften it, but you'll probably have to accomplish the bulk of the removal by cutting the caulk with a sharp knife and pulling it off with pliers. The process will leave small patches of material clinging to the substrate. These patches can be thin enough to be almost invisible, and it may be difficult to scrape them off without damaging the surfaces to which they adhere.

Residue Removal

Removing silicone caulk residue effectively is a two- or three-part process. Softening the residue by prolonged exposure to mineral spirits loosens its bond with the substrate. Leaving one or several rags soaked with the solvent in contact with the caulk for several hours is the best way to accomplish this. When the residue has softened, much of it will come off under the vigorous action of a scrub brush, but you may need a razor knife or pull scraper for stubborn patches. Avoid sandpaper. No matter how coarse the grit, silicone caulk simply gums it up and renders it ineffective.

Considerations

Avoid using mineral spirits on painted, lacquered or otherwise finished surfaces. Denatured alcohol may be an appropriate substitute, but it's best to test any solvent you use on an inconspicuous part of the substrate and avoid it if you notice discoloration or other undesirable effects. In lieu of soaking a rag with solvents, you may be able to remove the residue by soaking an abrasive sponge instead. Softening the residue and scrubbing it at the same time is most likely to be effective on smooth substrates such as glass, tile or Formica.