STAIRS GUIDE

Carpet to Hardwood Stairs

Everything to know before your carpeted stairs become wood stairs: what is under the carpet, every option, matching your floors, the code rules that change when you add new treads, how the job is done, and DIY or hire.

7 chapters | Options compared | Step measuring sheet | Stair planner spreadsheet

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What's inside

Stairs are the most-used, most-seen and least-forgiving surface in a house. A few decisions made before anyone starts make the difference between stairs that look built-in and stairs that look added on.

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About this guide

This guide was written by Vision Flooring LLC, a flooring company in Everett, Washington, led by owner Alex Babko. We have 20+ years of experience and 3,800+ clients behind us. Hardwood refinishing and installation, LVP, laminate, baseboards and floor repair after water damage are our everyday work, and this guide is what we explain to homeowners at their kitchen tables, written down so you can keep it.

Stairs carry more than looks: every step has to be the right height, depth and strength. This guide explains how stair work is done and what to ask for. Building codes are adopted and enforced locally, so before changing stairs, check with your building department, and follow the instructions of the tread, adhesive and finish manufacturers you use.

> ⚠ **General information, not a substitute for your instructions**
> Every home, floor and product is different. Your flooring and product manufacturers' instructions, your local building codes and your insurance policy always come first; where they differ from this guide, follow them. Work safely and call a licensed professional for anything you are not sure about.

How to use it

- Read it once start to finish (about an hour), then keep it handy. Every chapter has **"The short version"**: its key points in a few lines.
- Boxes marked **Pacific Northwest note** matter most in damp climates like ours; they are good practice anywhere.
- The worksheets at the back are made to print on letter paper. The spreadsheet that comes with this guide does the math for you.

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CHAPTER

01

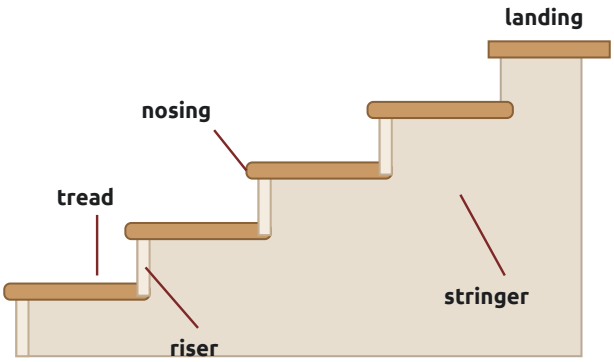
What’s under your carpet

Most carpeted stairs were built to be carpeted: plywood or particle board treads with a rounded front edge, and nothing pretty underneath. Some hide real hardwood. Ten minutes and one corner of carpet will tell you which.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Learn six words: tread, riser, nosing, stringer, skirt and landing. Every quote uses them.
- Lift the carpet at one step in an out-of-the-way corner to see the tread material.
- Plywood, particle board or OSB treads get new wood treads on top or in their place; real hardwood may only need refinishing.
- Count your steps, landings and open sides now: they decide most of the work.

Stair parts in plain words



Tread, riser, nosing, stringer and landing, seen from the side.

- [ ] **Tread:** the part you step on.
- [ ] **Riser:** the vertical board between treads.
- [ ] **Nosing:** the rounded front edge of the tread that sticks out past the riser.
- [ ] **Stringer:** the sloped structure under the steps. An *open* stringer shows the ends of the steps on the side; a *closed* one hides them behind a board.
- [ ] **Skirt board:** the trim board along the wall side of the stairs.
- [ ] **Landing:** the flat area between flights.
- [ ] **Newel post, handrail, balusters:** the railing parts.

The one-step peek test

1. **Pick a hidden spot**
   The bottom step at the wall side, or a corner of a landing, where a test won't show if you change your mind.

2. **Pull back the carpet and pad**
   Pliers lift the carpet off the tack strip. Fold it back with the pad underneath. Wear gloves: tack strips have sharp pins.

3. **Look at the tread and its front edge**
   Note the material, how thick it is, and whether the front edge is a rounded "bullnose" or a separate hardwood nosing. Take photos.

4. **Press the carpet back**
   It usually grips the tack strip again. A carpet installer can re-stretch it if needed.

What you'll likely find

UNDER THE CARPET	WHAT IT MEANS
Plywood, OSB or particle board treads with a rounded edge	The most common case. These were never meant to be seen: they get new hardwood treads over them (after cutting off the rounded edge) or are replaced.

UNDER THE CARPET	WHAT IT MEANS
Hardwood treads, often oak, with staple and tack-strip holes	Good news, possibly. They can be sanded and refinished if they are thick enough and not badly damaged; the holes are filled or remain as small marks.
Painted or glued-over wood	Can sometimes be stripped and refinished, but it is slow work. Compare with the cost of new treads.
Squeaks, soft spots or loose treads	Fixed before anything new goes on top: new wood over a loose tread squeaks too.

Count before you call

Write down: the number of steps (one tread plus one riser is one step), landings, open sides, how many steps have a return on the open side, and whether the railing stays. Contractors price stairs by these counts. The Step measuring sheet at the back has a place for each.

CHAPTER

02

Your options

There are five ways to get from carpet to wood-look stairs, and they differ in looks, durability, noise, safety and how much the stairs are out of use. The right one depends mostly on what is under the carpet and what is on the floors around the stairs.

THE SHORT VERSION

- Hardwood under the carpet: refinishing is often the simplest route.
- Plywood under the carpet: new hardwood treads and risers, over the old ones or replacing them.
- Unfinished treads finished on site match your floors best; prefinished treads go faster.
- LVP or laminate stairs can match an LVP floor, but the nosing pieces need the most care.

OPTION	BEST WHEN	WATCH OUT FOR
Refinish the existing treads	You found solid hardwood treads in good shape	Old staple and tack holes, thin or split treads, and risers that may need paint or new boards
New hardwood treads and risers over the old stairs (often called retrofit or cap treads)	The old treads are sound plywood or particle board; you want real wood without rebuilding the stairs	The rounded edge has to be cut off flush; step heights at the top and bottom change (Chapter 4)
Replace the treads completely	Old treads are damaged, loose or squeaky, or the stairs are open underneath and accessible	More work and more disruption; the stairs may be out of use longer

OPTION	BEST WHEN	WATCH OUT FOR
Prefinished treads (factory-finished)	You want the stairs back in use quickly, with no on-site finishing	Matching the color of existing floors is harder; small gaps and edges can't be sanded flush
LVP or laminate with stair nosing	The floors around the stairs are LVP or laminate, and you want them to match	Nosing pieces must be glued and fastened well; laminate is harder and more slippery on stairs
Wood treads plus a runner	You want the wood look with grip and quiet in the middle	A runner needs a good pad and secure installation; it is a separate trade

What drives the price

Stairs are priced by the step, not by the square foot, because almost all of the work is cutting and fitting. Many contractors count one tread plus one riser as one step, a separate nosing as a step, and a landing as two steps. Beyond the count, these make the biggest difference:

- ☐ **Open sides:** each step with an exposed end needs a return or a finished edge.
- ☐ **Landings, winders and curves:** every non-straight step is custom work.
- ☐ **Finishing on site or prefinished:** sanding, stain and coats on site take more labor and time.
- ☐ **Stain matching** to existing floors.
- ☐ **Railing work:** removing and reinstalling balusters or a new railing is often a different trade.
- ☐ **Repairs underneath:** squeaks, loose treads and uneven steps fixed first.

? Ask every bidder the same three questions

How do you count my steps (and the landing)? Are the treads unfinished and finished here, or prefinished? What happens with the railing and balusters? Two quotes that answer these differently aren't comparable yet.

END OF THE FREE SAMPLE

Carpet to Hardwood Stairs

You just read a few pages. The complete version has everything below, with every worksheet and the spreadsheet.

- ✓ What's under your carpet: stair parts explained and the one-step peek test
- ✓ Every option side by side: refinish, new treads and risers, caps over existing stairs, prefinished treads, LVP or laminate, runners
- ✓ Design choices: species and stain to match the floor, stained or white risers, nosing, landings, skirts and railings
- ✓ Safety and code basics, and the top-and-bottom step trap when new treads change step heights
- ✓ How the job is done, step by step, and how long the stairs are out of use
- ✓ DIY or hire: the skills and tools it takes, common mistakes, and the questions to ask a stair contractor
- ✓ Living with wood stairs: slip safety, runners, pets, cleaning and recoating

Get the full guide →

visionflooringllc.com/carpet-to-hardwood-stairs · Instant download · PDF guide + stair planner spreadsheet

Questions first? Text 425-218-4234; a real person answers.