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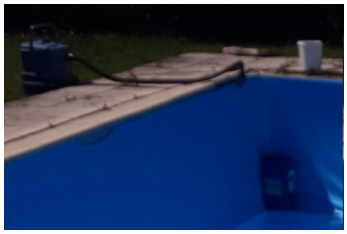
The Handyman France Idiots' Guide to Changing your Pool Liner

There are various types of pools (tiled; painted; monocoque; liner; etc) but by far the most common is a vinyl liner, and they're usually blue. All types have their pros and cons, and here we look at the practicalities of changing a liner.

Properly cared for, a liner should last ten years – longer in a lot of cases. Ultimately, though, it will need to be renewed. The photo on the left is of a piece of liner that is around ten years old, but has been subjected to extremely high levels of chlorine and exceptionally low pH. You have been warned!

The image above right is of a liner that is only around three years old, but has permanent stains at the water line. There are two reasons for this – poor or irregular maintenance, and excessive use of sun-screen by swimmers – especially P20 cream. Whilst the liner isn't harmed by this, it's unsightly.

Whatever the reason for changing your liner, the process is fairly straightforward but strictly sequential. If you can get the timing right it can all be done and dusted in two or three weeks. Get the timing wrong, and it could be two or three months.



The tools and equipment needed are minimal. A tape measure; Stanley knife; Phillips screwdriver; flat bladed screwdriver; a small hammer; dust-pan and brush; and a vacuum cleaner.

The first step is to draw the pool and take measurements. At this stage, dimensions cannot be totally accurate, but need to be as close as possible. With a simple rectangular pool, the length of the sides and depth at each end should be sufficient. More complex shapes will require more detail. The idea at this early stage is to establish an approximate cost. If you can live with the estimate, the process starts becoming more serious, and you soon pass the point of no return.

For the liner to be ordered, exact dimensions are needed. So the old liner must be removed – and in the process, destroyed. This is what I mean by passing the point of no return. The structure of the pool can now be inspected, and any repairs needed added to the cost.

The manufacturer will demand very detailed dimensions, including diagonals. If steps are included, each step's height, width and depth will need to be measured in at least two places per step. If you have a silo-shaped pool, the the deepest part needs to be measured, which isn't always as easy as it first appears.

It is also essential to establish which type of hanger is used. At the top of the liner there will probably be a plastic or metal profile. This holds up the liner, and although it may look quite flimsy, all types work remarkably well. Some hanger designs make it necessary to remove the *margelles* so the cost of replacing them should be included (usually the margelles break when removed, or cement stuck to the bottom of them makes it impracticable to re-use them).

The weather plays an important part. No wind. No rain. And warm. Nothing below 20°, but as high as you like. If it's too cold, the liner loses a lot of its' pliability, which makes it difficult to handle and almost impossible to get a smooth, crease-free finish. Mind you, too hot can make the job extremely hard work. The liner in the photo on the right was fitted on a day when the temperature in shade was a pleasant 34°. But as you can see, there is no shade. It was 56° in the work area.

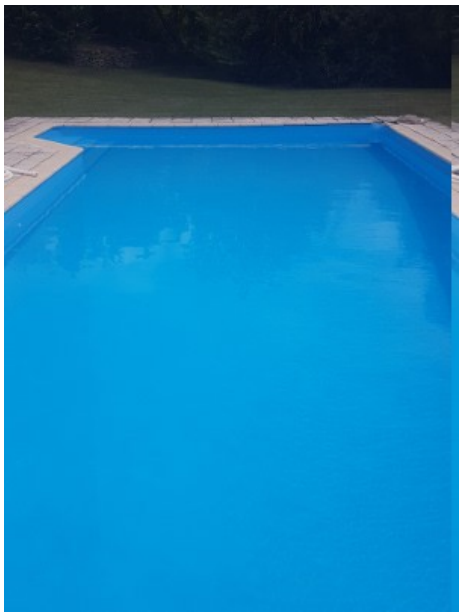
Most pools have a concrete floor, and this needs to be covered with a felt 'underlay' which must be glued into position. If the pool has concrete walls as well, then the felt needs to extend up the sides. It's essential that the pool is kept clean and free from any bits that will protrude and show as lumps under the liner. That's one reason why a windless day is needed – also, the felt is very light, so controlling it in a gale is not recommended if you value your sanity.

It is vital that the rest of the procedure is done working in bare feet. Damage to the liner will occur if any sharp objects are stuck to the soles of shoes. Once the liner is on the floor of the pool, you need to figure out which way round it needs to be. There's no easy way to do this, it's just a question of unfolding it and looking for obvious signs, such as the location of the steps. Corners are often marked with an arrow, but with oval pools you will need to align the seam with a datum point on the pool structure. The manufacturer should give you this information. If there are no instructions, positioning an oval liner is extremely difficult.

Starting with a corner (or the datum point), fix the liner to the rail – you may need to use the flat-bladed screwdriver to poke the liner into the rail, and the small hammer can be used to ensure a snug fit. As you work along the side, pull the liner reasonably tight. When you reach the next corner, it should be in line – if not you need to pull it tighter, or release some of the tension. At this stage, the floor will appear very creased – don't worry about that yet. Wait until the entire circumference is on the rail, then smooth out the wrinkles. It's often easier to simply stand at the side and kick the liner in to position. Note that it is impossible to get the liner perfectly positioned this way – just get it as close as you can. The corners and steps should be weighted down with plastic containers 90% filled with water. The photo above right shows how ill-fitting the liner appears at the steps.

Now fit the skimmer(s), lamp(s), vacuum point, bonde de fond and return blower(s). Ensure the liner is pulling down on the hangers by standing directly underneath the holes you are about the cut. If you don't, your liner will 'frown'. Fit the covers for the skimmers etc before cutting the holes. Use new gaskets.

You now need to undo a small section of the liner from the rail, and insert the tube from a vacuum cleaner. Tape up the gap. Switch on the vac, and watch the liner start to move into the correct position. Some more kicking and pulling will probably be needed now.



Start refilling with water. As the water level increases, the liner will move. Even one or two centimetres of water is enough to slide the liner into the correct position, especially around the steps. Leave the vac running to assist with this process until the floor of the liner in tucked into the corners, and the sides are looking correctly positioned. If you leave the vac *in situ* for too long, you will probably have difficulty in getting the top of the liner into the rail as the weight of the water will prevent you from pulling the liner upwards. The plastic containers will float away when the water is high enough to make them redundant (which is why they should only be filled to around 90%).

As you can see, no specialist equipment is needed and the job is technically fairly straightforward. But it is physically demanding, particularly as once you've started you must finish in the same day, regardless of how big your pool is. Only the refilling can delay the completion. Note that it can take some time to 'balance' the water chemicals, and adding chlorine (or whichever sanitiser you favour) alone will not ensure water quality. Calcium, total alkalinity, CYA, pH and sanitiser all need attention.

Bon splashing!