



PLAYGROUND SURFACING MATERIALS

All playground surfacing falls into two broad categories – loose fill and unitary. While there is no perfect playground surfacing material, each has advantages and disadvantages.

LOOSE FILL SURFACING

1. Wood Chips

Pros: One of the most inexpensive surfacing options on the market. Can provide good fall attenuation if installed properly with good drainage.

Cons: Not ADA compliant and the quality of chips varies by vendor greatly. Large chips can create safety hazards

2. Engineered Wood Fiber (EWF)

Pros: Provides good fall attenuation if installed and maintained properly. Can be ADA-compliant if certified by the supplier and relies on proper installation and maintenance.

Cons: Requires an effective drainage system and continuous maintenance to maintain fall protection and ADA accessibility, and the material needs to be replenished periodically.

3. Shredded Rubber

Pros: Does not break down like engineered wood fiber and only requires six inches of depth.

Cons: Same installation requirements as EWF, with less need for replenishing. However, it is more easily displaced than EWF or wood chips and therefore requires more raking and distributing. The initial cost is higher than the EWF.

4. Pea Gravel

Pros: Does not break down like EWF or wood chips and therefore requires less maintenance and replenishing.

Cons: Is not ADA compliant and is only rated for fall protection up to 5 feet. Should not be used around structures with fall heights greater than that. In wetter regions, it tends to become compacted and it can be difficult to maintain appropriate depths

UNITARY SURFACING

Unitary surfacing provides a consistent surface that provides less regular maintenance and is more ADA-compliant than loose fill. However, it is more expensive than loose fill and its performance depends on the quality of installation. Replacement costs need to be compared against the ongoing maintenance costs of loose fill. Dark colors can become burn hazards in certain climates and locations. It is important to use an established vendor with a good warranty. Below are some pros and cons of different unitary surfacing products.

1. Poured-In-Place Rubber

Pros: Can provide excellent fall attenuation and is 100% ADA compliant, if installed properly. It is available in a wide variety of colors and designs and requires little maintenance.

Cons: Over time, it can require repair by a qualified contractor.

2. Precast Tiles

Pros: Can provide excellent fall attenuation and is 100% ADA compliant, if installed properly. It is available in a wide variety of colors and designs and requires little maintenance.

Cons: Gaps and cupping can be an issue if not installed properly. Tiles should only be installed by the manufacturer or manufacturer-certified installer. Over time, they can require repair by a qualified contractor.

3. Synthetic Turf

Pros: Can provide excellent fall attenuation and is 100% ADA compliant, if installed properly. It is available in a variety of colors and designs and requires little maintenance.

Cons: Seams can become trip hazards if not installed or repaired properly. Over time, they can require repair by a qualified contractor.

We encourage you to research each product and work with established playground vendors to find the surfacing that best fits your needs and budget. For questions regarding playground surfacing, contact [*riskmanagement@sdao.com*](mailto:riskmanagement@sdao.com).

