

ask martha

caring for your diamond

Q: *How should I care for my ring?*

A: Considering your engagement ring's sentimental—and monetary—value, you'll want to make sure it lasts a lifetime (if not several). First, insure the ring: Add a jewelry rider to your homeowner's or renter's insurance, or take out a separate policy with a specialty insurer like Jewelers Mutual. Familiarize yourself with the fine print; some policies will cover theft but not "mysterious disappearance" and others may not reimburse repair costs, says Donna Syverson, director of personal lines marketing at Jewelers Mutual. You'll need to provide a description of the ring—its cut, carat weight, and metal—as appraised by a certified independent gemologist (see page 172 for our story, "Deconstructing Your Diamond"). Submitting a close-up photo of your ring is also a prudent idea. Extra precautions, such as laser inscription and home security systems, may qualify you for discounts.

To keep your ring sparkling, clean it often to remove lotions, skin oil, and everyday dirt, which cloud it. You can soak the ring in warm water and mild dishwashing liquid, and scrub with a soft toothbrush, says Tracy Lantz, associate director of public relations at the Diamond Information Center. Or, soak it in equal parts ammonia and cold water for half an hour, and let it air dry. Any brand-name jewelry cleaner is another good option.

Ring maintenance should also include twice-yearly visits to your jeweler, who can check the integrity of the prongs on your setting, says Lantz. (Bonus: You can have it professionally

cleaned then, too.) A loose setting can lead to a dislodged diamond—so if you want to avoid a frantic search on all fours, consider seeing your jeweler as often as your dentist.

It's also smart to take your ring off when doing anything requiring lots of work with your hands—or involving water (such as dishwashing or swimming), since it can make your fingers shrink. Just remember to put the ring in a secure location (i.e., not on a ledge near the garbage disposal), whether in a kitchen drawer or a jewelry box. If you often take off your ring at home, consider an immobile safe or an unusual but memorable hiding spot. If you need to stash it when you're on vacation, store it in the hotel safe.

should we assign seats?

Q: *Do I need to assign seats, or even tables? Can I simply allow my guests to seat themselves for dinner?*

A: Open seating may seem as if it would be fun and spontaneous, but guests shouldn't have to feel like they're the new kid in the school cafeteria. You don't want them to be stranded, without somewhere welcoming to sit, or rushed into claiming territory.

That said, you needn't micromanage—only the most formal receptions require place cards at each setting, says Joyce Westin Dunne, a Chicago wedding planner. Assigning only tables and letting guests choose their chairs is perfectly acceptable.

Keep in mind: When you assign tables, you aren't just seating your guests, you're also crafting a party. Kellen Book of Canard Catering in New York City says you can create a lively atmosphere with thoughtful table assignments that take into account peo-

ple's interests and personalities. The bride and groom are best equipped to make that happen, as they are the only ones who know everyone attending.

Should you decide to forgo table assignments, remember that your guests will take longer to seat themselves. And you'll need to account for more settings than number of guests, since it's inevitable that there will be incomplete tables (for example, six guests seated at a table for eight).

registry dilemma

Q: *My fiancé and I have lived on our own for a while now, and we really don't need many things. Should I register anyway? And if so, what sorts of gift suggestions would appeal to our guests?*

A: Guests often like registries because they want to buy the couple things they actually need and can use. Since your friends and family know you are already set up, they may want your guidance even more. So even a small registry might be helpful to them.

Besides, *yours plus mine* doesn't always equal *ours*, says Susan Bertelsen, senior vice president of Macy's Wedding & Gift Registry. You will want to establish a household that reflects the two of you as a couple. Would your fiancé appreciate less feminine sheets? Or maybe you want to trade in his stovetop espresso maker for a larger electric one? Also think about items that signify your union, such as monogrammed towels, which can create a little moment of togetherness when you use them.

Now is the time, too, to upgrade, replace worn items, or fill in incomplete sets. Is your cookware missing a grill pan or extra saucepan? Or maybe you've always secretly wished you had