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Paint and other home improvement products

General information

Many products commonly used in households for home improvements are toxic, which means that precautions need to be taken when using them and proper procedures need to be followed when disposing of them. This fact sheet explains acceptable ways to dispose of paints, paint and varnish strippers, varnishes, shellacs, wood oils, stains, paint thinners, brush cleaners, glues, and wood preservatives.

Organic solvents such as acetone, toluene (toluol), and mineral spirits are common ingredients in many of the products listed in this fact sheet. These solvents are classified as hazardous because they are flammable or potentially harmful to health, or both.

All products in this fact sheet are poisonous and some may contain carcinogenic substances. Do not pour products listed in this fact sheet down the drain or sewer. Also, do not dispose of flammable products in the garbage, drains, or storm sewers, for this is illegal.

Please note that information about the toxicity of hazardous substances may change—so please do not rely entirely on this fact sheet for your information. For additional advice about hazardous materials, or if you have questions about the disposal of home improvement products, please call your local or county public health department, solid waste department, district Department of Natural Resources office, or the University of Wisconsin Extension Solid & Hazardous Waste Education Center.

How to dispose of home improvement products

The products listed in this fact sheet pose a health hazard if misused, and if disposed of improperly can contaminate drinking water sources and pose a long-term health hazard. To reduce health hazards and environmental contamination associated with the use, storage, and disposal of home improvement products, buy only as much as you need.

If you do have unused or leftover home improvement products, consider sharing them with neighbors or a community group (such as a community theatre, service organization, or recreation department). Alternatively, make use of hazardous waste *Clean Sweep* collection programs designed to collect hazardous materials from residences and small businesses. Contact your county extension office, solid waste department, or the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) for *Clean Sweep* schedules.

Paint

There are two basic types of paint: oil-based, which contains organic solvents, and water-based (latex) paint, which does not contain organic solvents. These paints may be shared if

- the paint is lead-free,
- the paint is still in the original can,
- the can has a legible label, and
- the paint (if latex) has not been frozen.

Very small quantities of unusable water-based and oil-based paint may be safely disposed of by allowing them to harden, then throwing the hardened material in the trash. Once the paint hardens, the remaining chemicals are locked into the solid mass. (Paint or any other home product containing an organic solvent should not be evaporated in urban areas that are experiencing summer ozone alerts due to smog conditions.)

How to harden paint, paint strippers, glue, varnishes and other products safely

- **Move the container to a sheltered, secure, outdoor area away from flames, children, and pets.**
- **Open the lid and allow the liquid to dry.**
- **Discard the hardened material in the trash.**

Lead-based paint

Paint manufactured before 1978 for residential use and paint used for farm and marine equipment today may contain lead. Look for the word “lead” on the can label. For safe disposal, harden the liquid using the recommendations described above, then wrap the solid in plastic and save it for disposal in a household hazardous waste collection program.

Marine paint

Marine antifouling paint often contains copper or zinc, and older formulations may contain tin (in the form of tributyl tin, TBT). Copper, zinc, and tin are hazardous metals. Save paint containing these metals for a hazardous waste collection program.

Artist paint

Many artists’ oils and acrylics contain metals that are hazardous to health. The following unused paints should be saved for a hazardous waste collection program: antimony white; barium yellow; burnt umber; cadmium yellow, orange and red; chrome yellow, orange and green; cobalt violet (cobalt arsenate); emerald green or Paris green; flake white, mixed white or lead white; lemon yellow; manganese blue and violet; molybdate orange; Naples yellow; Thalo blue and green; raw umber; Scheele’s green; strontium yellow; vermilion; and zinc yellow.

Paints not listed above may be hardened and thrown away.

Paint or varnish stripper

Read the label to verify the main ingredient. If the product contains an organic solvent, such as methylene chloride, solidify only very small quantities as described previously, and dispose of the solids in regular trash. Otherwise, save it for disposal in a household hazardous waste collection program.

Varnishes, shellacs, wood oils, and stains

Solidify very small quantities. These materials are FLAMMABLE, so do not dispose of them in the trash or down the drain.

Paint thinner (turpentine, mineral spirits, etc.)

These products are classified as solvents. Because they are FLAMMABLE, do not dispose of them in the trash or down the drain.

Reuse solvents by allowing particles to settle in a closed container. Transfer the clear thinner to a safe storage container (such as an old paint thinner can with a lid) for reuse, and clearly label the container. Solidify the remaining sludge, then wrap it in newspaper or plastic and dispose of it in the regular trash.

Never use discarded food containers to store household chemicals—although using old coffee cans to soak paint brushes in thinner is a reasonable exception to this policy.

Brush cleaners

Disposal technique depends on the main ingredient. Read the label.

If you have a **solvent-based** cleaner, settle the particles and reuse the liquid just as you would reuse a solvent (see above). Dry out or solidify the remaining sludge and discard it in the trash.

If you have very small quantities of a product that contains the detergent **TSP (trisodium phosphate)**, flush it down the toilet or washtub drain with plenty of water.

Glues and other adhesives

Disposal technique depends on the main ingredient. Read the label.

If the glue is **solvent-based**, harden it according to instructions above. Because these unhardened glues are flammable, do not dispose of them in the trash or down the drain. Keep them away from open flames.

If the glue is **water-based**, solidify it and throw it in the trash.

Wood preservatives

Wood preservatives are chemicals used to kill or repel the pests that cause wood decay, and therefore they are classified as pesticides (see University of Wisconsin Extension publication G3453, *Home and Garden Pesticides*). Read the label to verify the main ingredient, and then, depending on the product description, follow the advice below.

If the product contains metal-based ingredients (such as copper or zinc naphthenate), save it for a household hazardous waste collection program. Such products are considered hazardous to human and environmental health.

If the product contains Pentachlorophenol (PCP or penta), do not use it, and avoid all exposure. Do not attempt to dispose of it. PCP presents severe human and environmental health hazards. Preservatives containing pentachlorophenol are contaminated with a form of dioxin that is a suspected cause of some cancers and birth defects. If you have any of these products, please call your local health department, local solid waste department or the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to find out about hazardous waste collection programs. Package the material carefully, label it, and store it to await proper disposal.

For more information

Solid & Hazardous Waste Education Center,
www4.uwm.edu/shwec/
715-346-2793

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture,
Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP)
http://datcp.wi.gov/Environment/
Clean_Sweep/index.aspx, 608-224-4545

Publications from the University of Wisconsin-Extension

Disposing of Hazardous Wastes from the Home: Home and Garden Pesticides (G3453)

Disposing of Hazardous Wastes from the Home: Waste Oil and Other Automotive Products (G3456)

Household hazardous waste collection programs

Home and farm products that contain chemical hazards can be taken to county-run hazardous materials collection facilities operating *Clean Sweep* programs. Some counties have permanent collection facilities and others have facilities that operate intermittently. Contact your county office or the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (608-224-4545) for collection schedules. Alternatively, contact private hazardous waste haulers who will make individual pickups for a fee.

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Disposing of Hazardous Wastes from the Home— Paint and Other Home Improvement Products (G3454)

R-6-2012