

PRO P **FACT** Sheet

Paint and Varnish

Why are paints and varnishes hazardous?

Paint and varnish are the most common household products that become household hazardous waste. Most paints and varnishes consist of four parts: a resin that forms a coating on the surface being painted, a solvent that keeps the paint in a liquid form until the paint is applied, pigments that provide the color, and additives such as thickeners and fungicides. Each part can contain a hazardous substance. There are two types of paints and varnishes: oil based and water based (latex). In oil based paints, the solvents (mineral spirits, toluene, and xylene) are derived from petroleum. In latex paints, the solvents are water based. Although both types of paints can contain hazardous substances, latex paints generally are less hazardous and have the advantage of lower odor, easier cleanup, and faster drying time since they contain fewer solvents. Several manufacturers now make solvent free latex paint.



In addition to petroleum based solvents, mercury and ethylene glycol are other hazardous ingredients found in paint. Very old paint may also contain lead.

How to determine if old paint is usable

Oil based paint can be good for up to 15 years. Latex paint is usable if it is less than 10 years old and has not been repeatedly frozen and thawed. If paint will mix when you stir it, it is probably usable. If there are no lumps when you brush it on newspaper, the paint is still usable.

Tips for safer use, storage and disposal

- Look for outlets for leftover paint. Try giving it to groups like Habitat for Humanity, shelters, local recreation departments, or a friend.
- Follow label directions concerning ventilation and cleanup.
- When storing paint, make sure lids are on tight. Professional painters recommend storing tightly sealed cans upside down. Label the top of each can with the color name and date purchased.
- Do not pour paint down household drains or place in the trash. Don't contribute to leachate problems in landfills, damage your septic system, or overload your sewage treatment plant.
- Solidify the paint and recycle the empty cans. Paint cans are made of the same material as soup and food cans and may be placed in your recycling bins as long as there is no liquid paint in the can.

How to solidify paint

Follow directions carefully to avoid causing harm to human health or the environment. If you have a chronic respiratory problem such as asthma, ask someone else to solidify the paint, as fumes might trigger symptoms. Please note that these suggestions are only for household quantities of leftover paint. Read all directions before starting.

You will need nitrile gloves, an old bucket or sturdy cardboard box, a stick for stirring, and absorbent materials, such as clay-based kitty litter.

Note: it is important not to use a paper based product for the absorbent, as spontaneous combustion may occur.

1. Select a location where there is plenty of fresh air and which is inaccessible to children and pets. Outside is the best choice. Make sure you are away from fire, pilot lights, flammable chemicals, or other sources of sparks or flames.

2. Do not smoke, eat or drink (especially alcohol) while solidifying paint. Avoid inhaling fumes (if you can smell it, you are inhaling it) and wear nitrile gloves to avoid skin contact. Nitrile gloves are available in most hardware stores. If you wear contact lenses, remove them while solidifying paint.

3. For small quantities, such as one or two inches in the bottom of a can, simply remove the lid, add the absorbent, and stir until all liquid is absorbed or remove the lid until the paint has solidified. This could take several days or weeks, depending on the amount of paint in the can.

4. For larger quantities of paint, mix absorbent and paint in an old bucket or sturdy cardboard box, and stir. It will be easier to mix if you pour some absorbent in the bottom of the bucket or box, and then add a little bit of paint at a time.

5. When paint is solidified, place the absorbent and boxes inside a garbage bag, seal it tightly, and dispose of it in the trash. Recycle the empty cans in your curbside or drop-off recycling bin.



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