

A fresh coat of 'safe' paint

by SARAH ELTON



For those with asthma or chemical sensitivities, summer is the best time to spruce up the home with a new coat of paint. Whether it's the bedroom or the back deck, the work is best done when the sky is clear and the air is warm.

That's because paints are a potential source of air pollution, both indoor and out. Most contain VOCs – Volatile Organic Compounds – chemicals that are released as noxious fumes when paint dries. VOCs not only compromise indoor air quality, when used outside they actually contribute to smog. While unhealthy for everyone, such gases can trigger asthmatic attacks.

The most dangerous period of off-gassing is during the first couple of weeks after painting, when approximately 80 to 90 per cent of VOCs are released. But paints continue off-gassing for months, even as long as a year. Better to use a product that won't introduce the chemicals into your environment at all.

The Canadian government has set guidelines for VOCs in consumer products, and air quality management bodies in the United States have recently required paint companies to reduce the VOC content of all their lines. However, paints still vary by more than their colours (see "Inside the Can"). Find out exactly what compounds are in a paint by looking up the Materials Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for each brand. The website

www.greenhomeguide.com is a good general source, which details potentially hazardous ingredients. Some paints also contain formaldehyde, preservatives and fungicides that could also bother people who react adversely to chemicals.

Before embarking on a project, calculate how much paint you need using a paint calculator to avoid waste. (These are available on company websites such as Home Depot, Glidden and Behr.) Then, prepare the area properly by cleaning the surface and using a primer – this will help the paint to last longer, extending the life of your job. Watch out for lead paint, commonly found in homes built before 1978. Ensure that you don't scrape, sand or heat-torch this paint, particularly if you are pregnant or have young children around, because of the risk of lead poisoning (for more information go to www.epa.gov/lead).

Next: ventilate, ventilate, ventilate. If you are inside, open the windows and position a fan so that it blows into the room. Start painting near the window and work your way toward the fan. Keep the fan on a medium speed so that the air flow doesn't impede the proper drying process. Even if you use a low-VOC paint, you should let a room air out for at least two to three days after painting before you move back in. Be sure to take appropriate steps to dispose of extra paint when you're done, because paints and sol-

vents are categorized as hazardous waste.

If you're so concerned about VOCs that you want to avoid painting altogether, you can purchase integrally pigmented plaster walls with natural wood trim. These eliminate the need for any paint. Outside, use weather-resistant woods like cedar or redwood and keep soil away from the walls to avoid rotting.

And one last thing: don't forget to dress for the part. Painting and staining, inside or out, is an air-filter face mask event.

INSIDE THE CAN



OIL/ALKYD: These paints are hazardous because the petroleum-based solvents used to keep ingredients in liquid form are toxic, and they have a high VOC content. Best avoided.

LATEX: Water is the solvent here, which reduces the VOC levels. Good news for asthma sufferers with a latex allergy – this paint doesn't actually

contain latex. The term is used because of its rubber-like flexibility when it dries. Comes in low or VOC-free forms. Brands to look for: AFM Safecoat, Benjamin Moore, Horizon by Rodda Paint Co.

ACRYLIC: Also water-based. Can be used indoors and out. VOC content varies. Brands: Farrow & Ball, AFM Safecoat

MILK/CASEIN: Comes from the milk protein of the same name. Dry-form is mixed with water and used immediately. No VOC content. Brands: Farrow & Ball

PLANT-BASED OIL: Despite its environmentally friendly sounding name, this paint gives off noxious gases and has a high VOC content. Floor coatings made with these oils are non-toxic. Brands: Eco-House

RECYCLED PAINTS: Unwanted latex paint is recycled into new shades and tints by specialty companies making it a cheap and green option. VOC content varies. Brands: Eco-peinture, Eco-Coat by Calibre Environmental Ltd.

STAINS: These tint rather than obscure wood when applied. Can be either oil or water-based. Beware of stains that contain wood-preservative chemicals; choose water-based ones to cut down on VOCs. Brands: Broda Coatings

EARTHEN PLASTERS: These clay-based products are applied with a trowel and give your wall texture and colour. A non-toxic VOC-free alternative to paint. Brands: American Clay