

PAINTS

Paints can pose environmental problems due to their flammable nature (solvent-based paints) and solubility (water-based paints). Disposing of paints the wrong way can result in a range of environmental problems such as groundwater and soil contamination through to fires and explosions. Oil based paints also contain metals like lead and cadmium which are toxic to both the environment and human health. When disposing of paints and paint wastewater, always ensure that you keep them well away from stormwater drains, or any place where they can enter and pollute a waterway (for example rivers, creeks, oceans, estuaries and lakes) or into drains and pipes that lead to sewerage systems.

Water-based paints contain solid pigments that can increase water turbidity (how cloudy the water is), causing

particles to clog fish gills and restrict their breathing. Increased turbidity also blocks out sunlight reducing plant photosynthesis, while thickeners used paints reduce oxygen, threatening the survival of aquatic creatures.

Oil or solvent-based paints contain organic compounds that can be toxic when inhaled. When broken down in water, they deprive aquatic organisms of oxygen needed for survival. Solvent-based paints may also cause tumours in fish due to their chemical toxicity as they can contain heavy metals such as lead, chromium, mercury and zinc. Heavy metals accumulate in the environment and can lead to long-term problems such as soil contamination and poisoning throughout entire food chains, eventually affecting humans.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Minimise disposal problems by following these simple tips:

- Ask about environmentally friendly paints.
- Buy only enough paint to do the job. Check the label to find out what coverage it will provide.
- If you have left-over paint, consider giving it to somebody who can use it. Churches, schools and some charity organisations may be able to use your excess paints and solvents. However, don't use up or give away paints containing lead, mercury, chromium or cadmium; the toxic metals will remain in whatever is painted.
- Call your local council to find out when the next Household Hazardous Waste collection is.
- In order for solvent wastes to be recycled and treated it is important that no mixing occurs. Each individual solvent and paint type should be kept in separate containers, with its contents clearly labelled.
- Small quantities of unwanted water-based paint can be poured onto absorbent material (for example, kitty litter). Once dried, it can be disposed of in your household garbage bin.
- http://www.maribyrnong.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page_Id=290&h=1 provides extensive lists of Dos and Don'ts for both water and solvent based paint disposal.
- Transfer as much paint as possible back into containers when finished.
- Never wash brushes, rollers and trays under running water as their waste ends up in sewers, stormwater networks or waterways.

MORE INFORMATION

- <http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/mao/paintwastes.htm> - environmental effects and proper disposal of paints, particularly for commercial painters.
- <http://www.state.ma.us/dep/recycle/hazards/paint.htm> - US site going through hazards and management options of various paints.
- <http://www.wastewise.wa.gov.au/pages/hazardous2.asp?ID=49> - How to best manage paints to minimise their negative impacts
- Australian Paint Manufacturers Federation Inc phone 9922 3955 ask for their information brochures 'Getting Rid of Old Paint' and 'Cleaning Up After Paint'