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A "go-green" painting primer: Avoid VOCs, and stay healthier

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Paint is the most visible thing in your home. You probably have spent many hours picking out just the right colors. But you should also think about what you don't see in your home — that "new paint smell," for example.

What you're really smelling are VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, and the fewer of those you have in your paint, the better.

And then there are always those leftover cans of paint that disappear into the basement or garage, often forgotten for years.

As we celebrate the 36th Earth Day today, consider ways to "go green" when you paint.

By reducing toxins and waste as you adorn your walls with new colors, you'll protect your family's health and the environment.

You can also take advantage of the increasing variety and availability of eco-friendly paint to help save some of that green stuff in your wallet.

Follow these painting guidelines:

It's the water

Try to use only water-based paint. This is commonly known as latex paint, even though it doesn't actually contain any latex. You may need an oil-based (or alkyd) paint for a few situations, such as priming bare wood.

But today's latex paints will meet most needs, interior or exterior. Latex paints have fewer VOCs than oil-based paints. Another advantage of latex paints is that you don't need paint thinner or other toxic solvents to clean up with afterward.

Be less VOC-al

Over the years, manufacturers have eliminated toxins such as lead, mercury and chromium from nearly all consumer paints. But, as paint changes from a liquid to a solid when it goes on the wall, it still emits VOCs. These can irritate the eyes and respiratory system, and cause dizziness, headaches and other health problems, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

For most people the effects won't be long-term. But those who suffer from asthma and allergies, along with the very young and elderly, face a greater risk. VOCs also cause smog.

Every paint can should list its amount of VOCs, although it may be in fine print.

Green Seal, an independent, nonprofit organization that performs environmental evaluations, has set these recommended maximum levels for VOCs: For flat paints, 50 grams/liter for interior paints and 100 for exterior. For non-flat paints, 150 for interior and 200 for exterior.

Some manufacturers that meet these VOC levels and other criteria have applied for the Green Seal certification. Those certified products are listed at www.greenseal.org/certproducts.htm#paints.

You should have no problem finding low- and zero-VOC paints. The Environmental Home Center (www.environmentalhomecenter.com) in Seattle carries a variety of "green" paints and related products. Most major paint stores and brands now feature at least one line marketed as environmentally friendly, low-VOC or low-odor paint. A small Seattle-based manufacturer, Best Paint (www.bestpaintco.com), produces paints so low in toxins, they are sought out by people with chemical sensitivities.

Find a green deal

King County's new EcoDeals program (www.ecodeals.org), which promotes green products, lists four paints in the "Remodeling & Maintenance" category. Some of the listed paints offer discount coupons for people who register on the EcoDeals Web site.

Environmental Home Center has a new low-cost line of reduced-VOC paints (starting at \$15 a gallon), and also offers discounted prices on mis-tinted low-VOC paints — as low as \$5 a gallon.

At paint stores, always ask if there are special price breaks for quantity, or if you open an account. At one local store, the clerk offered a price of less than \$20 a gallon on a low-VOC paint, reduced from

the display price of \$39.

Major home-improvement stores, such as Lowe's and The Home Depot, now carry low-VOC paints in their regular paint lines. These paints, many of which meet the Green Seal standards, run from \$8 to \$40 a gallon — similarly priced, or even cheaper, than higher-VOC paints.

Keep in mind that darker-color paints tend to contain more VOCs, so you may have to look harder or pay more for low-VOC paints in those colors.

Buy less, save more

Keeping your leftover paint to a minimum saves money and reduces waste. As a general rule, one gallon of paint will cover 350 to 400 square feet. To help determine how much paint you'll need for a specific room, you can find calculators on many paint company Web sites, or do an Internet search for "King County paint calculator."

If you do have leftover paint, never put it in the garbage. You might be able to give it away. Try www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/exchange, www.freecycle.org or www.seattle.craigslist.org. If you can't find anyone who can use it, take it to a facility or collection event provided by the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County (www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/disposal or 206-296-4692).

Every year, more than 1.3 billion gallons of paint are sold in the U.S., according to the National Paint & Coatings Association. For your next project, do your part to reduce the impact of all that paint on the environment. Paint it green!

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Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from

King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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