
Originally published April 3, 2011 at 4:32 PM | Page modified April 8, 2011 at 9:00 PM

EcoConsumer

Dispose of hazardous waste the safe way

It's like a magic trick. A cosmetic product sold in every drugstore and worn on the hands of millions of women suddenly turns into household hazardous waste.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

It's like a magic trick. A cosmetic product sold in every drugstore and worn on the hands of millions of women suddenly turns into household hazardous waste.

But that astonishing transformation only takes place when this product, nail polish, does not get used up and is about to be thrown away. Nail polish is one of dozens of common consumer products that are considered relatively safe in their everyday use but are not supposed to go in the garbage.

Fortunately, a growing number of options and resources are available for proper disposal of potentially toxic household products.

Q: I had no idea that I shouldn't toss a full bottle of leftover nail polish in the trash. What should I do with it?

A: If you can't find someone who will use it, most household

hazardous-waste collection facilities will accept bottles of old nail polish and many other household chemical products, at no charge. Check with your local government for locations and a list of accepted materials.

In King County, you can take these products to facilities in North and South Seattle, Bellevue and Auburn, and the roving Wastemobile. For more information, visit seati.ms/fKqjLh or call the King County Household Hazards Line at 206-296-4692. Rather than bringing in one or two items at a time, consolidate your loads for more efficient collection.

Q: Why are nail polish and other household hazardous wastes a disposal problem?

A: Nail polish in particular may contain ingredients such as toluene and formaldehyde that are linked to medical problems, and it is often flammable.

Household hazardous wastes thrown in the trash, dumped down the drain or flushed can injure sanitation workers and contaminate wastewater-treatment systems, septic systems or bodies of water.

Q: Which other household products require special handling?

A: Many pesticides, oil-based paints, cleaners, cosmetics and medications are potentially hazardous and should be disposed of separately from garbage.

Q: Besides nail polish, what's another common product that many people don't realize needs proper disposal?

A: It's a sticky one: Glue. Unusable, nearly-full tubes of glue products commonly get thrown in the trash, but they may contain toxic or flammable chemicals. King County says leftover glue, instant glue, rubber cement and model cement should all go to household hazardous-waste collection facilities.

Q: Aren't there other problems with toxic products in the home

besides disposal?

A: Absolutely. Children and pets risk poisoning from these products. With some toxic products, even using them in the recommended manner can cause problems.

Q: For instance?

A: Mothballs are at the top of the hazardous heap. They contain powerful insecticides, and if you smell mothballs you are inhaling those chemicals. Mothballs also may look like candy to a child. If someone ingests a mothball or other toxic substance, call the national number for poison control centers, 800-222-1222. Dispose of mothballs at a local hazardous waste facility.

Q: Using less-toxic products seems like the best solution, but what about hazardous products we really need? For example, how do you dispose of out-of-date EpiPens?

A: EpiPens (which dispense allergy medication using a spring-activated needle), other medical needles and syringes are banned from garbage in Seattle and are not accepted at household hazardous-waste collection facilities in King County. Some health-care providers or pharmacies accept them, often for a fee. For more information and other options, search online for "sharps disposal" and the name of your city or county.

Q: Why is proper disposal of household hazardous products so difficult?

A: It shouldn't have to be. Ask manufacturers to make their products less toxic and to fund disposal and recycling programs for their products. Governments and taxpayers should not have to bear the financial burden of proper disposal.

When you do have a choice, select less-hazardous products. With spring finally arriving in the Northwest, we would all rather enjoy our fresh air and clean water than worry about what we can and can't throw away.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services.

Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com