



ARTS AND CRAFTS MATERIALS

The Issue

If you are an artist or craftsman, you may be working with materials that have the potential to harm your health. It is important to protect yourself by taking proper precautions.

Background

Some artists and craftspeople might assume that all arts materials are safe to work with, based on the simple fact that the materials are readily available. However, some of these materials can pose a hazard if the safety instructions set out on the product label are not followed.

While it's impossible to list all of the potential hazards involved in every arts and crafts material or process, the following examples highlight some things that could be harmful:

- If you draw or paint, you might inhale dust from dry pigments, or fumes from the chemical solvents used to clean brushes. Many products are also flammable.
- Some photo-processing solutions used in developers, fixers, stop baths and intensifiers can irritate skin, be poisonous if ingested and may produce dangerous fumes.
- In jewellery-making and enamelling, you could inhale dusts or fumes during soldering, pickling, casting or finishing.

- In woodworking, you could seriously damage your lungs by inhaling wood dust over and over again. Some of the solvents and adhesives used in stripping, gluing and finishing can also hurt your health.

Potential Health Effects

Some of these arts materials can cause chemical burns or illness if you spill them on your skin, get them in your eyes or breathe or swallow even a bit of them just once. Repeated exposure to small amounts of certain materials can cause a variety of health problems, and prolonged exposure to some substances could damage your internal organs.

Anyone working with hazardous materials should take precautions. This advice is even more important for pregnant women, and anyone who takes medication or has a medical condition.

Remember too that poisonous materials pose a greater risk for young children. It is important to keep these materials out of reach and out of sight.

Health Canada's Role

Health Canada's Product Safety Program ensures that consumers are made aware of the information they need to use chemical products safely during foreseeable use. This involves setting out the criteria, for use by manufacturers, to classify, label and package their products. These criteria take into consideration the hazard of the product and the potential risks of using the product. Health Canada also investigates consumer complaints about the safety of products, and has the authority to take products off the market when necessary for safety reasons.

How You Can Protect Yourself

To protect yourself from potential health problems, learn all you can about the materials and techniques you are using. Look for safer alternatives, and don't try anything new until you have looked into the potential hazards. Take classes, or go to the library.

In addition, follow these safety guidelines:

- Read the safety instructions on your arts materials every time you go to use them. Follow the instructions to the letter.
- Keep materials in their original containers whenever possible. If you transfer materials, make sure to put labels on the new containers. Keep the original container nearby.
- Store all materials away from food and drink. Don't smoke, eat, drink or apply make-up in your work area.
- Do not wear contact lenses when you work. They can trap dust or splashed liquids, which could damage your eyes.
- When using solvents, acids or materials that produce dusts, work with the smallest quantities possible.
- Use a closed mixing box to control dust from powders, and clean up with a wet mop to avoid stirring up dust.
- Use proper ventilation. Depending on the materials you use, this could mean bringing in fresh air, or using a fan to draw fumes away from you. For some hazardous procedures, you may need to use a laboratory hood or a spray booth.
- Make sure you have a source of running water near your work area.
- Install a smoke detector in your work area, and keep a fire extinguisher close at hand.
- Use protective equipment, including:
 - Goggles to protect your eyes from splashes or flying splinters
 - Ear plugs to protect against loud or continuous noises
 - Rubberized gloves to avoid getting solvents or acids on your skin
 - Dust masks or respirators to prevent breathing in dusts and fumes

Finally, if you suffer headaches, dizzy spells, or start having severe mood swings while you are working, leave the project for a while to see if you feel better. These symptoms could be warning signs that you need to take additional steps to protect your health when working with arts and crafts materials.

Need More Info?

Health Canada Product Bureau
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ehp/ehd/psb/index.htm>

Canadian Paint and Coatings Association
<http://www.cdnpaint.org/>

Canada Safety Council
<http://www.safety-council.org/index.html>