Latex Paint: Hazards and Solutions for Disposal

Use Proper Disposal Methods. In California, it is illegal to dispose of latex paint in the trash or down storm drains or sewer drains. According to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC),* it is also illegal to air dry or mix small amounts of latex paint with any substance for the purpose of solidifying it and disposing of it because this practice is considered “treatment of a hazardous waste.” However, if latex paint has naturally dried out, it may be disposed of in the trash.

Introduction
The average household stockpiles 1 to 3 gallons of paint per year. In California, leftover latex or oil based paint is considered a hazardous waste and must be managed appropriately. This fact sheet defines latex paint and its potential effects on the environment and health, and presents practical ideas on how to use and handle it properly.

What is Latex Paint?
Latex paint is a water-based coating containing resins, solvents, pigments, and additives. It is durable, easy to apply, cleans up with soap and water, and it has replaced oil-based (solvent-based) paint in 85 percent of painting projects in California. In fact, over 58 million gallons of latex paint are sold annually statewide, making it the most frequently used paint product on the market. Although water-based (latex) paint is less harmful to the environment and your health than oil-based paint, its ingredients are hazardous. That’s why it must be managed as a hazardous material.

Environmental Effects
Latex paint can be highly toxic to the environment. It harms fish and wildlife, and contaminates the food chain if poured down a storm drain. It can also pollute groundwater if dumped on the ground. While it may be acceptable to clean paint applicators in the sink, pouring excess paint down the drain disrupts microbes and causes sewage treatment to be less effective and more costly. If thrown into the trash it can contaminate other recyclable materials, thus wasting valuable resources.

Health Effects
Latex paint can also have adverse effects on your health if not used properly. If used in closed areas, its chemical components can irritate eyes, skin, and lungs and cause headaches and nausea. It can also contribute to respiratory problems, muscle weakness, and liver and kidney damage.

What Can I Do?
As part of your preparation for a home painting project, you should consider the following tips for reducing, using, recycling, and disposing of latex paint.

Buy only what you need. Calculate and buy the amount of paint you need for a project. Many retailers provide this kind of help as a service to their customers. In addition, some retailers take back unused, unopened latex paint that they’ve sold to you. Check with your local retailer to see if they take paint back and under what conditions.

Use it properly. To protect your health, always apply latex paint in well-ventilated areas and wear a protective face mask and goggles that completely cover your eyes. This is especially important when spray painting. Store it properly. Store paint cans upside down with the lids on securely to keep it fresh until you need it again and make it more recyclable. Avoid storing it at extreme temperatures.

Use up leftover paint. The best way to get rid of leftover latex paint from one household project is to use it up on another. If you cannot use the paint, give it away in its original container to friends, neighbors, or community groups.

Reuse your paint applicators. Clean brushes and rollers in sinks or other facilities where wastewater flows directly into sewers for treatment. Do not clean applicators in the street or other places where the wastewater could flow into storm drains that in turn flow into local streams and rivers. Also, do not clean them in the backyard where paint may contaminate soils.

Recycle your leftover paint. Contact your local environmental health, solid waste, or public works department to find out about household hazardous waste (HHW) collection programs. These programs have been set up to collect, reuse, and recycle leftover paint from households. See "For More Information" for how to find locations of HHW collection programs.

Use paint exchange programs. Take advantage of HHW waste exchange programs sponsored by local government. These programs generally accept usable but unwanted paint and give it away to any individual that can use it. The paint is unprocessed, but still usable, and in its original containers.

Use recycled latex paint. Some leftover paint that has been collected through local HHW collection programs is sorted, consolidated, and strained, and then sent to paint manufacturers for reprocessing into a quality paint product. Through your local programs you may be able to get recycled paint free or at a low cost.

Although empty containers can be thrown in the trash, your local solid waste or HHW collection programs may be collecting the containers for recycling. A container is considered “empty” if no paint pours out when it is held upside down, any paint remaining in the container cannot be removed by chipping or scraping, and no propellant is dispensed when the pressure-sensitive valve is pressed down on an aerosol can.

*Refer to Hazardous Material Management Program for the complete details located on the Department of Safety & Risk Management webpage.