

# Bird Safety Corner

## Paint and Wallpaper

This month we'll focus on paint and wallpaper and how to safely use these products in your home. Most people have to occasionally paint the insides of their homes, but those of us with birds are quite concerned, and rightly so, about the effect of paint on our feathered loved ones. Last month we spoke about volatile organic compounds (VOC's) and their toxicity. Until recent years, all indoor paints contained large amounts of VOC's and were highly toxic to birds.

Fortunately this situation has changed in response to consumer requests for low and no VOC paints for the health of their families. Not only are VOC's released during painting, but it's been shown that paints continue to release low levels of VOC's into the air for years. Until recently, it was difficult to develop low and no VOC paints which were durable and in attractive colors, but that has all changed with new technologies, and most paint manufacturers now have low and no VOC lines of paints.



In addition to the obvious benefits to the health of ourselves, our families, and our parrots, low and no VOC paints are water-based, making cleanup easy, are not considered hazardous waste, making disposal much easier, and are good for the environment.

So, now that you've decided to paint, how do you find these paints and how do you read the labels? Remember that comments about paints also apply to primers. Here's a brief summary.

**Low VOC paints** use water as a carrier instead of petroleum-based solvents. While they must meet an EPA standard of no more than 200 grams per litre of VOC's, in reality most contain far less. If they have a **Green Seal Standard**, flat sheen paints contain less than 50 g/L and non-flat sheens contain less than 150 g/L. Low VOC varnishes have a VOC limit of 300 g/L. Low VOC paints will still emit an odor till they dry.

**Zero VOC paints** require a VOC concentration of 5g/L or less. A color tint can bring this up to 10g/L, which is still quite low.

**VOC absorbing paints** are a special class that actually traps VOC's like formaldehyde so they can't be released into the air. They are of limited availability.

**"Natural" paints and finishes** are made from natural raw ingredients, but this does NOT imply safety for you and your birds. In particular, they often contain **essential oils**, which will be discussed in an upcoming Safety Corner. Essential oils can be particularly toxic to birds, so don't be fooled by a "natural" label into thinking that a paint is safe for your birds.

VOC's aren't the only thing to be concerned about with paints. Paint also often contains **fungicides** (to kill fungus) and **bacteriostatic chemicals** (to kill bacteria). These too can be hazardous and include some VOC's. While these are more commonly used in industrial settings, like schools, they may show up in paints for the home. Unless the paint will be used in an area prone to organism growth, like a basement, you might want to avoid paints with these chemicals.



**Paint thinners** also contain large amounts of VOC's, so avoid using these, if possible. Fortunately they are not usually needed for water-based paints.

**Paint strippers** have long been caustic and toxic, but a new generation of paint strippers is now available that are water-soluble, noncaustic, and nontoxic. They are more expensive and take longer to work, but are really the only safe way to remove paint in a house with birds.



While **wallpaper** isn't as commonly used these days as paint, if you are applying wallpaper, make sure you use primers with low or no VOC content and use a paste free of formaldehyde and metals.

Even with all the great products on the market, it's best if birds can be temporarily removed from the area being painted. Nothing is 100% safe, and the safety of your feathered companions is paramount. If painting the inside of your house, you might want to do it in stages so your birds can be moved around the house while the painted areas

dry for a few days.

Here are links to two fabulous online resources going into more detail than I have here and providing links to some brands of safer paints available:

[http://eartheasy.com/live\\_nontoxic\\_paints.htm](http://eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_paints.htm)  
<http://www.avianweb.com/nontoxicpaints.html>

Keep in mind that the list of brands available is always changing. When you go to the store to buy paint, ask about these safer paints and always read the labels.

Here is information about how to safely repaint an old bird cage:

[http://eartheasy.com/article\\_bird\\_safe\\_paints.html](http://eartheasy.com/article_bird_safe_paints.html)  
<http://www.avianweb.com/refinishingcages.html>



Next month we'll talk about more household hazards.

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