

Keeping Household Hazards at Bay

BY NOELLE LORD CASTLE

LEAD

It seems we never talk about old houses, hence old paint and finishes, without the topic of lead coming up. It's a serious subject, but no reason to head for the hills or gut your home. Basic safety precautions and smart working conditions go a long way.

Anyone working in a building built before 1978 should assume lead-based paint or varnishes (LBP) might be present. You can have your home checked by certified professionals, and certainly you should pick up a lead home-testing kit at a hardware retailer before beginning any project where old paint will be disturbed.

LBP does not present a hazard when intact and in good condition, but as soon as its condition deteriorates and begins to chip, peel or become chalky, or the surface is disturbed through scraping, sanding or drilling it becomes poisonous. Most lead poisoning occurs through exposure to lead dust that we either breathe in or ingest through hand-to-mouth circumstances. When undertaking projects on painted surfaces, disturb

these vents with 6-mil plastic completely. Always wear a HEPA filter mask while working, and do not eat, drink or smoke in the work area. Remove all your clothing before leaving the work area, and wash this clothing separately from other clothing. Leave work shoes behind in the work area so you do not track lead dust to "clean" areas.

ASBESTOS

One would think asbestos to be old fashioned at this point - an issue that would be resolved by now. Unfortunately, since asbestos was used in over 3,600 different materials, prominently in building materials, it remains in common use to this day in the U.S.

The toxicity of asbestos comes from its friability, or its ability to be broken down into a powder that can become airborne and therefore breathable. Asbestos can still be found in exterior siding, floor and ceiling tiles, insulation over pipes, ductwork or boilers, tapes and glues, and in some fireproofing and plaster.

The best advice: do not disturb it. Asbestos is a considerable hazard that is best left to professionals for removing, handling, and testing.

MOLD

It isn't possible to find a home without any trace of mold. Beyond the allergy concerns it poses, they create a serious health risk to our building materials as well.

The problem with mold is that it traps moisture which ruins all things wood, and eats through organic materials like paints and finishes. Molds are microscopic fungi that thrive in any damp environments and grow year round. Mold you can see is usually black, brown or green spots which are spore-producing colonies that release millions of air-borne spores throughout your house, and some species have "tentacles" working behind the scenes that reach more than 20 feet.

The basic precautions to discourage mold growth include running basement dehumidifiers (and keeping the basins clean!), run circulating fans in your bathrooms and basement, keep wintertime humidifier water fresh and free from growth, adequately ventilate your house, and quickly repair any plumbing leaks. Make sure any carpet in bathrooms and basements can be lifted and aired out, and use vacuum cleaners and air conditioners with HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filters. Always wash surfaces with a bleach and water solution to kill any existing mold before

repainting or wallpapering.

Unfortunately most homes offer the perfect habitat for molds and we can't change that, but what we can control is not offering a hospitable environment. Deal with the source of moisture, and you will deal largely with your problems with mold.

A WORD ON RADON

Exposure to radon gas is the second leading cause of lung cancer. Got your attention? It leaches through rock and ledge below your house and can also poison your water, so get your home tested. A do-it-yourself kit can be ordered and analyzed through your state testing lab. The good news is radon reduction systems, often good ventilation and mechanical circulation, are not too expensive and can be 99% effective at reducing radon levels in your home. ■

Noelle Lord Castle, operates Old House C.P.R., and shares her passion for helping owners of older buildings discover how to take good care of them through consulting, teaching and writing. She can be contacted by visiting www.oldhousecpr.com.

Lead Rules

1. Do not create dust
2. Confine and contain any dust created
3. Use HEPA and wet methods to clean as you go

older paint layers as little as possible and never use a belt sander, torch or heat gun over 1100 degrees, or dry scrape and sand. Any scraping or sanding should be done "wet" to control dust. Also do not use a paint stripper with methylene chloride. Many exterior paints contained lead and can poison your soil, your drinking water, gardens, pets or children at play when old siding is scraped in preparation for repainting.

Before you begin a project involving older painted surfaces, seal off work areas with 6-mil plastic taped securely over all openings, and clean up with HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filtration vacuums. Regular vacuums will spread lead dust particles further. Also turn off forced-air heating systems and air conditioning, and cover

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS CHECKLIST

- project expectations & plan
- qualified referrals
- technical expertise
- restoration experience
- personality fit
- insured professional
- guarantees & restrictions