

From the Claims Desk: Painting and Working with Chemicals

Walking down the hallway, sitting in the gathering space, looking around the offices, you can't help but notice that the walls are starting to look a little dingy. Your space needs repainting, you realize.

Anyone can paint, right? A group of volunteers can knock it out in less than a day. While it's true that painting can be a do-it-yourself project, it's not as easy as it seems.

There are a lot of hazards to consider before you pick up the brushes, starting with safety. Samuel Carucci, Vice President of Claims at the Church Insurance Companies, says, "The most important thing about any project is personal safety and the safety of others."

Ladder Safety

When painting a space of any size, there is no greater safety risk than the ladder itself. There are many different types, so make sure you choose the right one for the job and take the right precautions. For example, Sam says, "A ladder that's over six feet high should be counter-balanced with someone placing their weight on the bottom rung."

Another consideration, he says, is the changed range of motion when you're up on a ladder. "You could get disoriented and fall very easily," which could result in an injury as serious as brain trauma or paralysis.

Sam therefore notes, quite simply, that not everyone should climb ladders. If a volunteer is uncomfortable with heights, exceeds the weight limit, has issues with balance, or has a heart condition, he or she should not be the one painting from the ladder. "Sometimes people don't even know they have a heart condition until they climb to the top of the ladder and get dizzy," he says. For that reason, it could be a good idea to apply age restrictions to volunteers for this kind of labor.

He also says to, "Mark the area where the ladder is being used." That way, no one opens a door or backs a car into the ladder.

Dropcloths

Whether you're painting indoors or out, Sam recommends using only non-slip surfaces to cover the floor or ground. "Fabric dropcloths are ideal," he says, "but you can use sheets and cloth tablecloths, too. The idea is to avoid using a slippery surface," such as plastic. A slippery surface can be made even more slick with paint, making it possible for a fall and an injury to occur.

Chemical Use and Lead- and Asbestos-based Paint

It wasn't until the late 1970s that it became illegal to use asbestos and lead-based paints. If your facilities were built before then, you may still have this kind of paint somewhere on your premises. Stripping, sanding, or scraping old paint can release lead or asbestos particles into the air, which could then be inhaled and create serious health problems.

That is why it is critical for indoor painting projects to have proper ventilation, and for paint stripping projects, Sam also recommends the use of a respirator, even during clean-up. “That could be the most dangerous part of it,” he says, “with dust and paint getting stirred up into the air.”

Many people use fans to keep the air flowing, but that’s the opposite of what you should do. “When you use a fan, you’re spreading around chemicals, and if you are working with lead- or asbestos-based paint, you’ve just created an environmental hazard.”

It isn’t just airborne particles that you need to consider. He cautions that “If you don’t remove paint correctly, particles can drift to the floor and get left behind. If little kids play on that floor and put fingers or other things in their mouths, you’ve got a problem.”

Waste Disposal

In most parts of the country, you can’t just throw unused paint or chemicals in the garbage. “Doing so could result in heavy fines, as well as causing environmental and safety hazards,” Sam warns. Instead, take your unused materials back to the hardware store. In most cases, they will properly dispose of them for you.

Also, be careful of how you throw away or store any materials used for painting projects. “Bunching up rags, or leaving paint or other chemicals in direct sunlight, or depositing a host of items in the garbage together could lead to spontaneous combustion and an uncontrollable fire,” Sam says. So be sure to dispose of items separately and carefully.

Supervise Volunteers

You may have volunteers performing everything involved in a painting project, “but they should be supervised,” Sam says. “Make sure they make safe choices from the very beginning to the very end of the project.”

If you’re as focused on safety as you are on choosing the right color, then your project — and your people — will turn out just fine.