



ECOS Paints used at Governor's House, Bulfinch Award Winner 2019. Interior Architecture + Design by Lisa Tharp. Photography by Michael J Lee.

How to create a healthy home environment

By Deborah Lynn Blumberg

You buy organic, you recycle and you've switched to using healthier cleaning products at home. But what about the paint that covers your walls, the stainer on your living room floor, and the wood glue you'll use to remodel your home?

More homeowners are making the switch to healthier, eco-friendly paint and home improvement products to increase their well-being and help the environment. The shift comes as awareness continues to grow about our increased exposure to toxins and the health benefits of using products in the home that are free of harsh chemicals.

Each year, more than 10,000 chemicals are made in, or brought into the U.S. One study found the average pregnant woman has, on average, 56 different chemicals in her body, while another just-published study in the journal *Occupational & Environmental Medicine* found that women exposed to paint chemicals at work are more likely to have a child with autism.

Whether it's car exhaust fumes in big cities, pesticides in rural areas or the paint on our walls, "we're exposed to more toxins these days," says Ann Shippy, an Austin, Texas, doctor board certified in internal medicine and functional medicine. Most chemicals, pesticides and metals "don't break down well," Shippy says, "so their accumulation keeps growing. In my patients' lab tests, I'm alarmed at the levels I see."

A healthy home environment

Chemical-laden paints and home improvement products can cause short-term problems like eye, nose, and throat irritation, headaches, nausea, vomiting, rashes, dizziness and nosebleeds. But, they can also cause long-term issues like kidney, liver and central nervous system damage or cancer, Shippy says, when they absorb into the blood and accumulate.

Shippy says it's important to reduce exposure to toxins wherever possible, whether it's ditching plastic water bottles, switching to a paraben-free shampoo, or choosing a healthier, non-toxic paint. With most people these days spending 90% of their time indoors, creating the healthiest possible environment at home is key.

Our homes are tightly sealed for good reason, so they're energy efficient. But that also seals in undesirable chemicals in conventional paints like volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, which are responsible for that new paint smell, and solvents. Glues and sealants also "out gas," or release, into our homes and our bodies, Shippy says.

"Our homes don't breathe," says Shippy. "All of this exposure is cumulative, and a little bit does matter, especially over time. People need to be aware of reducing their exposure in all the ways they can control." For paint, Shippy says no-VOC, eco-friendly ones are best.

Ann Louise Gittleman, a nutritionist and expert in functional and integrative medicine, has seen clients with chemical-induced hives, asthma attacks and joint pain. Initially, many don't connect their symptoms to paint. "It's an invisible toxin for some reason," she says. And, it's not just walls. Paint on cabinets or on refinished furniture can also cause problems.

Gittleman says to read labels to make sure the products you're buying are truly no- to low-VOC. In her own home, Gittleman also has an air filter in every room and a water filtration system. "It's important to take these measures to get the kind of environment that's helpful and nurturing rather than depleting and toxic," Gittleman says.

Luxurious, vibrant paints

While some homeowners might worry they have to sacrifice design and hardiness for a healthier, non-toxic paint, that's far from the case. Manufacturers have developed a wide variety of colors of high-quality, healthier, odorless paints that are easy to apply.

ECOS Paints makes its VOC-free, solvent-free, odorless non-toxic wall paint with no heavy metals in a variety of shades and finishes. It can also color match to any manufacturer's paint. ECOS counts health-conscious companies like Google and Microsoft as clients, and every gallon of its paint spreads one and a half times further than a conventional paint. ECOS makes over 50 products, including primers, stains, and varnishes, among others.

California-based interior designer Briana Nix, who's styled for clients including NBC, Country Home Magazine, Ralph Lauren Home, In Style and Jimmy Choo, recently used ECOS paints' Silverado Ranch in a nursery for her client Angela Elias, the editor of PopSugar. Both Nix and Elias were impressed with ECOS' Lullaby paints line.

"We didn't want to overwhelm the little guy with a bunch of fumes," Nix says. "We wanted something odor free and chemical free. Lullaby paint offers that, and also such soft, sweet colors for nurseries."

Nix also works for online design service Decorist, which partners with BuyBuyBaby. Nix has designed and set up mock nurseries in several BuyBuyBaby stores across the country, and she's used Lullaby paints on the walls.



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Like "liquid gold"

In Boston, Lisa Tharp, principal of Lisa Tharp Interior Architecture + Design, came across ECOS when building her own new home. She'd been exposed to toxic chemicals while working in an office building and wanted to use the healthiest possible finishes and products. She used ECOS wall paint, floor paint and wood varnish on what she deemed her Concord Green Healthy Home.

"I was so happy to have found the ECOS line," says Tharp. "ECOS is so wonderful at matching all major brands of colors, and they were a lifesaver for me as I was in serious need of healthy options. It's helped me and many of my clients." Tharp was able to stop her allergy medications after moving into her new, healthy home.

At first, Tharp's subcontractors were skeptical about a new paint. "But once they worked with it, they were really impressed," she says. They were also happy not to have their usual headache at the end of the day. In the end, her contractor called ECOS Paints "liquid gold," she says.

Now, Tharp is on a mission to educate her clients about the importance of choosing healthier products for their homes. "If you value fresh air and clean water and organic food and healthy lifestyle choices, why not use products that are going to support that well-being rather than compromising your well-being with toxic choices?" she says.



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