

A Step-By-Step Guide To

STRIPPING PAINT FROM WOOD

Do-it-yourselfers often put off restoring furniture or other woodwork for one reason: they don't know the ins and outs of the first step--removing the old finish.



We would like to show you how to remove old finishes, step-by-step, from the materials you'll need to get started to tips on how to use paint remover safely.

So read on, and in a matter of a few minutes you'll be well on your way to restoring that prized piece of furniture to its original beauty.



What is Paint Remover?

Solvent-based paint removers or strippers use chemical solvents to remove old finishes. They are not one chemical, but a combination of chemicals, each with a specific job to do.

The active ingredient is usually a chemical called methylene chloride. Some products contain active ingredients other than methylene chloride, but they are not as effective in penetrating, blistering, and lifting the old finish. Other chemicals in paint removers work to accelerate the stripping process, to slow the evaporation of the stripper, and to act as thickening agents.

Paint strippers typically come in two forms: liquid and semi-paste. In general, the liquid works faster. The semi-paste is best for all-around work, because it doesn't run or drip when applied to vertical surfaces.

It goes without saying that any chemical or combination of chemicals with the potency to lift off old paint should be treated with respect. Solvent-based strippers work fast and are harmless to wood, but they may pose health hazards to humans and should be used in accordance with manufacturer's instructions.

We have included a list of safety and health tips. But no list can take the place of the manufacturer's recommended use of its product. It is important to read individual product labels and follow them exactly.

What You'll Need

How Much Stripper to Buy

The amount of paint remover you will need depends on what you are stripping and how many coats of old surface must be removed. In general one gallon of remover will strip 75 to 100 square feet. A chair or small end table with a clear finish on it will require about one quart. A dining room table with a clear finish will probably require two quarts. Try to buy only what you will use to avoid storing paint-removing chemicals in the home.

Materials To Do The Job

- **Paint Brush.** An old, wide one will do. Natural-bristle will last longer than synthetic.
- **Scraper.** A dull, flexible-blade putty knife is best. If necessary, dull the cutting edge and corners of the blade with a metal file; otherwise, you might gouge the wood.
- **Toothbrush, ice pick, cotton swabs.** Handy for getting into tiny crevices or intricate designs in the wood.
- **Steel Wool pads (#2).** Helpful for removing the stripper or old finish from pores in open-grained woods such as walnut, oak, or mahogany. Also, can be used to prepare the surface for a new finish.
- **Metal cans.** (eg. large coffee cans) Good for holding the paint remover while work is in process, and for collecting the waste (sludge) when the work is done. Make sure the container you use has a securely fitting lid.
- **Burlap, twine, or coarse string.** Handy for removing paint from leg turnings (using shoe shine or back-and-forth rubbing motion).

- **Stiff-bristle scrub brush.** Useful for removing the old paint from places inaccessible to a scraper.
- **Disposable pie pans or some other suitable container.** Place under the legs of the furniture to catch drippings.
- **Dropcloth, newspapers, cardboard, and old rags.** To catch drippings and sludge to protect the surface underneath the work. Paint removers can damage linoleum, asphalt, plastic, and vinyl.

Protective Equipment

- **Safety goggles.** To completely cover and protect the eyes.
- **Rubber gloves.** Not the dish-washing kind. Should be chemical-resistant, such as neoprene or butyl.
- **Clothing that covers all skin.** Long-sleeved shirts, pants, socks, and shoes. If working at eye-level or above, wear a cap or hat.

Setting Up Your Work Site

Selecting a Work Site

- **The single most important consideration is the availability of fresh air.** The best location is outdoors, preferably in a shaded area, a carport, or under some type of cover to shield the work from the sun. The sun will speed up the evaporation of the remover. A garage with windows and doors on two sides to create adequate cross ventilation also can be used. Avoid working indoors if at all possible.
- **If you must work indoors, open all windows and, if possible, all doors to achieve a strong flow of fresh air through the work area.** It is advisable to use forced ventilation (fan) to improve the flow of fresh air. Because some removers are flammable, however, be sure to read the instructions on the label before using a fan as the friction between metal parts may spark and ignite the vapors. The label is the key. It will advise you on proper ventilation.
- **Do not allow children to play in the work area** to avoid exposure to paint-removing chemicals.

Set Up

When setting up your work area, it is a good idea to elevate the work by using saw horses or some equally sturdy support. This accomplishes two things:

- **first**, by having the work slightly above waist level, you will reduce the chance of getting a backache that often comes from prolonged bending;
- **second**, for best results, the work should not touch the floor.

The Procedure

- **1. For best results work in warm weather.** A good working temperature range is 65 to 85 degrees. Try to work in the shade even if it means moving the work as the sun moves.
- **2. Remove as much hardware as possible from the piece.** Use masking tape to cover any hardware that can't be removed.
- **3. Wear chemical-resistant gloves and safety goggles** to avoid contact with the skin and eyes. Chemicals in paint removers can be painful and irritating if splashed into the eyes or onto the skin.
- **4. When you're ready to use the paint remover, STOP!** Read the entire label before opening the container. Some removers should be shaken by hand before use. Cover the container with a cloth and open the cap slowly to allow for the gradual release of pressure buildup.
- **5. Carefully pour the remover into a metal container.** Replace the cap tightly each time you pour some remover. Store the container in a cool place when not in use. Dip your brush into the metal can and bring out a generous helping of remover.
- **6. Don't apply the remover as you would paint.** In fact, don't "brush" on the remover in the usual sense; rather, "lay" it on in much the same way as you would ice a cake. Working in one direction, preferably on a flat surface, apply the remover to an area of about two square feet at a time. If you are working on a vertical surface, such as a table leg, start at the top and work down. In about five minutes you will see the remover working--the surface will begin to peel and blister.
- **7. Don't try to rush the remover.** The time required for the stripper to remove the old finish varies among products. The label will specify the time required, but generally it ranges from 15 to 20 minutes. As the stripper penetrates the old finish, it forms airtight "layers." If you try to rush the scraper, the result will be a sticky goo that is next to impossible to remove.
- **8. While the remover is working, bide your time.** Get some fresh air, away from the work site, to reduce your exposure to the paint-removing chemicals. You may even want to polish handles, rings, or other ornamental hardware while you're waiting for the remover to do its work.
- **9. When the remover has done its work, it's time to remove the resulting sludge.** A gentle scraping with a dull putty knife will take the residue right off. Scrape away from you, and go with the grain to minimize the effect of any scratches made with the blade. On carved or grooved surfaces, a toothpick, coarse twine, or old toothbrush can greatly aid the removal process. Wipe off your tools frequently on newspaper.

- **10. The object is to remove all the old finish from one section at a time .** The first section or two will be a trial-and-error process until you determine how many coats of paint you are trying to remove. On very old furniture with many coats of paint, several soak-and-scrape operations may be required. Wait the full time for each layer you add, and be equally generous with each successive coat.
- **11. As you remove the paint, wrap the residue in plenty of newspaper.** Place the newspaper outside in the open air, so the remover will evaporate completely before sealing all materials in one of the clean metal containers for disposal. After removing the bulk of the sludge from the piece, use the old rags or burlap to wipe away any remaining residue. Place these outdoors as well.
- **12. All traces of the stripper must be removed for the new finish to adhere properly.** To remove the last residue of stripper or old finish it will be necessary to wipe the piece with a rag, stiff-bristle scrub brush, or steel wool pad, rubbing with the grain. This is especially true for open-grained woods like walnut, oak, or mahogany. Allow the piece to dry overnight before continuing to refinish.

Cleanup and Disposal

- After you finish a section, wrap the remover/old finish in a thick fold of newspaper and place it outdoors, where the liquid will evaporate more quickly.
- After each work session, place all other papers, rags, applicators, and waste (old-finish residue) outdoors. Be sure to collect all of the residue, as the old paint may contain harmful materials.
- When the liquid has evaporated (it typically evaporates very fast), place all these materials into a metal container that has a secure lid.
- You can then dispose of the material according to local waste disposal requirements. Contact your local sanitation department or waste disposal contractor for more information.

Safety Tips

- Preparing furniture for a new finish is a rewarding experience. Knowing the proper use of chemical paint remover, and how to avoid potentially adverse effects from overexposure, will make the experience that much more enjoyable. Moreover, the confidence that comes from such knowledge will no doubt have a positive effect upon the quality of your work.

- Listed below are some safety tips you should consult before and during your refinishing project.
- 1. **Read the label carefully.** Familiarize yourself with the safety precautions printed on the manufacturer's label. Refer to it periodically during the project.
- 2. **Provide maximum fresh air flow through the work area.** Avoid inhaling solvent vapors as much as possible. Take frequent fresh air breaks.
- 3. **Wear safety goggles while handling the remover.** If any remover gets into the eyes, wash with water. Keep your eyelids open, even if you have to hold them open with your fingers. (Keeping the eyelids open allows air in to evaporate the substance). If burning sensation persists after about ten minutes, see a physician.
- 4. **Cover all skin areas.** Wear chemical-resistant rubber gloves made of neoprene or butyl. Also wear long-sleeved shirt, pants, socks, shoes, and a hat or cap (especially if you're working at or above eye level). If any of the remover gets on the skin, wash off with soap and water.
- 5. **Avoid smoking.** Don't work in an area where there is a possibility of sparks or flames.
- 6. **Open the container of remover carefully.** Cover it with a cloth and open the cap slowly to allow the gases to escape gradually. Pour enough remover for your immediate working needs into a metal can and replace the cap tightly. Repeat this procedure each time you reopen the container. Store the container in a cool place when not in use.
- 7. **Don't store unused paint remover around the house.** Buy only what you need.
- 8. **Keep paint remover and other household chemicals out of the reach of children.**
- Any potential health risk from exposure to paint removing chemicals depends on the amount and duration of exposure. Some physical symptoms that indicate overexposure are eye irritation, dizziness, light-headedness, and/or headache.
- As soon as you experience any of these, take a break and get some fresh air. Do not resume the project until you have increased the ventilation through the work area. For your comfort and safety, take fresh-air breaks frequently and leave the work site whenever you are not actually applying or removing stripper.
- **Other Possible Effects**
- A portion of inhaled methylene chloride in paint stripper is converted by the body to carbon monoxide, which can lower the blood's ability to carry oxygen. When the solvent is used properly, however, the levels of carbon monoxide should not be hazardous.
- Individuals with cardiovascular or pulmonary health problems should check with their physician prior to use of the paint stripper. Individuals experiencing severe symptoms such as shortness of breath or chest pains should obtain proper medical care immediately.
- Methylene chloride has been shown to cause cancer in certain laboratory animal tests. Recent laboratory studies indicate, however, that the response is unique to animals tested and not relevant to humans. Available human studies, moreover,

do not provide the necessary information to determine whether methylene chloride causes cancer in humans.

- Nevertheless, it is prudent to minimize exposure to solvent vapors.