

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Hazardous Materials in Collections

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Most of the objects in our museum collections are safe for us to handle and to exhibit. But sometimes we run across an object that may be hazardous. It is crucial to be able to identify those objects and take the appropriate precautions to keep staff, volunteers, and visitors safe.



[Timely Tips: Hazardous Materials in Collections](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Examples of hazardous materials that may lurk in our collections are patent medicines, pharmaceuticals, explosives and firearms, nitrate film, older cosmetics, taxidermy, and anything with mold. If you have any of these in your collection, there are steps you can take to mitigate risks.

Step 1: Walk through your collections storage and exhibit areas, and do a visual inventory. Read any labels or other information included with the objects. Flag anything that might be hazardous so that you can do further research.

Step 2: Research the objects. Look at accession records and any provenance information. Go online and search for information about how the object was used, how and when it was manufactured, and any common chemicals used to make it. Look for resources that will help you identify potential hazards and identify ways to mitigate the hazards or dispose of the objects if necessary.

Step 3: Contact experts to determine how to safely handle and dispose of the objects. For old cosmetics and medicines, ask a pharmacist. For firearms, explosives, and fire hazards, check with police and/or fire departments. For taxidermy, talk to the Department of Natural Resources. If the hazardous material is in a container or other object, such as a bottle, that you need to keep in your collections, contact a conservator about safely cleaning and preserving the object while disposing of the hazard.

Step 4: Be sure to wear protective gear that is appropriate for the level of risk and wash your hands well after you have handled the object. Isolate any hazardous objects by placing them in clear, sealable bags and tubs. Clearly mark the containers as hazardous and place them in an area as far away as possible from other collections, and that is not easily accessible to visitors.

Step 5: Dispose of the hazardous materials in a safe and appropriate manner.

Remember, if you suspect you have hazardous objects in your collections:

- identify potential hazards and do some research.
- contact an expert about disposal or possible preservation.
- protect yourself and isolate the objects.
- follow the expert's advice and safely dispose of any hazardous materials.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Conserv O Grams](#) (National Park Service)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[A Little Help from My Friends: Working with Emergency Service Providers](#)

October 5 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

[Fire Suppression for Museums](#)

October 10 (Connecting to Collections Care)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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