



## Utrecht Art Supplies

### Linseed Oil: Odor and Safety



**Ask the Expert:** “I recently started painting in oils, and have noticed that some of my tube paints have strong smells. I read on the internet that flax oil has phytoestrogens that can cause health effects, and I know that solvent fumes can cause problems. The linseed oil has a combustion warning. How concerned should I be about the odor of painting oils?”

**A:** First, it's important to understand that we can't give advice about any specific symptoms or condition. Any specific health problems should be discussed with a physician. That said, in general, while solvent fumes from turpentine and other volatile thinners may be potentially harmful, not all strong smells indicate a health risk. Traditional oil colors are made using a vegetable oil vehicle, usually linseed, safflower, poppy or a combination. The oils used in painting are not made in food-safe conditions, but they are not very different from nutritional oils. Linseed oil does have a characteristic odor that some find unpleasant, but it doesn't release harmful fumes like solvents.

Some solvents used in the studio produce vapor that can be harmful or flammable at a certain concentration, and it's essential to follow the indications on the product package for safe handling, storage and disposal. Traditional tube oils don't contain solvents, however, except for extremely minute amounts in driers, where present. Thinners are generally not present in significant amounts until they are added by the artist.

While it's true that the food-grade, unfiltered versions of some oils contain phytoestrogens (plant compounds that may mimic animal hormones when ingested) in water-soluble impurities, we doubt whether it's even possible for these compounds to be present in alkali-refined linseed oil, which has been rigorously washed and purified. Egg yolk has phytoestrogens too, as do pinto beans, chickpeas, whole wheat and some fruits and vegetables.

Oil in a closed bottle poses no combustion risk. Combustion warnings on linseed oil refer to the possibility of fire from piles of oil-soaked rags, gloves or steel wool which can catch fire from a buildup of heat from oxidation. These warnings apply to any vegetable drying oil, including many cooking oils. Oil-saturated rags can safely dry when laid flat; larger amounts should be held in a lidded metal container with water and disposed of daily.

Artists who find the smell of linseed oil unpleasant may have a better experience using safflower, poppy or walnut oil, each of which has a milder aroma (but weaker drying properties). If smells associated with traditional oil painting simply can't be well tolerated, it may be worth evaluating water-miscible oil paints. Water-miscible oils are still made using modified vegetable oil, but the inclusion of water cuts down on the smell of the paint vehicle, making it possible for sensitive individuals to still enjoy real oil painting.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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