



Utrecht Art Supplies

Is it safe to paint with your fingers?

Ask the Expert: "Sometimes I just can't resist smudging drawings and moving paint around with my fingers. I was taught that you're not supposed to do this, but how risky is it, really, for the artist and the art?"

A: This temptation is familiar to most artists. As a standard studio practice, we recommend avoiding prolonged or repeated skin contact with paints, but just about every artist understands the impulse to smudge paint, pencil and charcoal with fingers. In spite of our advice, we realize most artists will risk an occasional smudge or smear, and as long as the materials aren't risky (check package labels for indications), it's probably not a big deal but absorption and sensitivity can build up with repeated exposure.



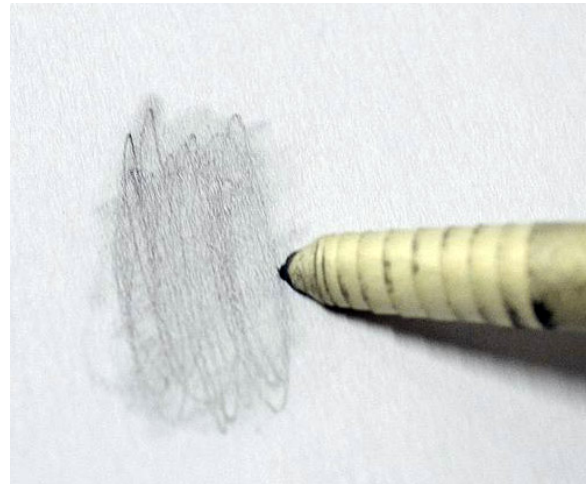
Latex finger cots suitable for dry media

Experts believe Da Vinci's sfumato technique involved heavy manual manipulation of wet paint. Historical treatises include instructions on rubbing oils and varnishes into paint surfaces. It's important to remember, however, that artists of the past weren't as aware of health risks associated with art materials as we are now.

The occasional, harmless smear of paint that inevitably gets on skin is easily managed by washing up, but using fingers as a painting

instrument definitely falls under the "prolonged and repeated" definition. Not all colors are problematic- many pose no significant risks. Things get complicated on the palette and canvas, however, and it's not always easy to control where every color, thinner or medium ends up.

There are ways to directly manipulate paint without exposing yourself to unnecessary risks. "Finger cots"- rubbery sleeves that look like the fingers of a glove- are protective covers which can be worn to isolate fingers from the paint surface. Finger Cots are also great to keep in the studio in case you have a small cut or need to cover a bandage. For painting, nitrile should be selected instead of latex, because nitrile is less permeable to solvents and chemicals.



Where graphite and charcoal on paper are concerned, the risk more is to the drawing rather than the artist. Marks that have been smudged with fingers can be bound to paper by skin oils, making them hard to erase. Skin oils can also lead to yellowing and darkening of the paper over time, if present in sufficient amounts.

Paper stumps and tortillions are a much better choice for softening edges and smoothly

distributing dry media on paper. Stomps are much more precise than fingers, and don't introduce problematic residue. When stomps and tortillions get saturated with drawing medium, they can be cleaned with a kneaded eraser or sanding pad.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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