

Handling Books That May Contain Arsenic

Information for University of Chicago Library Patrons

We have learned that a very small percentage of materials in the Library's print collection have covers that may contain arsenic. Copper arsenic compounds were used as a green pigment in textiles and home furnishings during the 19th century. In 2019, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation embarked on a study of green cloth-covered book bindings from the 19th century and continues to lead the way on research regarding these compounds in library materials. Their current findings suggest that the publication date range for volumes containing arsenic is 1830 to 1880 and that such books are bound in green cloth or green leather. Most green book covers from this period do not contain arsenic. (While books containing arsenic are green, not all green books contain arsenic.) Our best current estimate based on the testing we have done is that less than .03% of the print titles in our collection contain arsenic. As we identify print titles that contain arsenic, we will take measures to provide other options to make the content available wherever possible.

If you need to use a book that meets the criteria (published between 1830-1880 and with a green cloth or green leather cover), pick up nitrile gloves at Circulation to use when bringing the book to Circulation for testing. Staff there will arrange for testing by our Library conservators. Testing will take approximately a week. (Exception: Special Collections will implement procedures for providing access to rare and unique books in their collections.)

The University of Chicago Library does not recommend that you borrow or use a suspect book before it is tested by Library Preservation staff.

We encourage you to contact us at Ask a Librarian at <http://lib.uchicago.edu/ask> for help in identifying digital sources of this content to use in place of those sources that contain arsenic.

Safety

Arsenic from textiles is not airborne and is not readily transmitted through the skin. The risk primarily comes from ingestion.

If you choose to use these suspected volumes before testing, it is best practice to observe the following precautions.

- Use nitrile gloves (available at Circulation and in Special Collections) when handling.
- Do not eat, smoke, or touch your face until you have completed handling the book and thoroughly washed your hands.
- Keep the book away from children and pets.
- Return the item to circulation staff. Do not place it in the book drop.

If you have additional questions, please contact Preservation at pres-questions@lib.uchicago.edu.

Library Conservation will follow research findings on this subject, and procedures will be updated as needed.