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Books and Pictures are Precious

It is worth your effort to protect them!

If they are important enough to keep, it is equally important to understand how best to protect them.

While some paper such as newsprint is meant to last only a short while, others may remain intact for centuries. Here are a few inexpensive but important things to remember for safeguarding your books and pictures, especially rare ones.

Even the best quality of paper will not stand up to abuse. Factors which affect paper are mainly environmental conditions, insects and man.

Paper items should be kept in a dry environment, as humid conditions can cause mold to grow. This usually shows up as dull rusty spots. The problem of mold can be temporarily cured by exposing the paper to a fungicide in a closed container. However, if the same humid conditions are present after treatment, the mold may return. To minimize this, use a dehumidifier if necessary. Or better still, move your books to a less humid area.

Lack of air circulation can also cause mustiness and mold. Where books are stored in boxes, pictures hung on walls or the house has been closed for some time, open everything to air periodically. To improve the air circulation around a picture place a piece of cork or wood along the lower back edge of the frame, to create a gap between the wall and picture.

Light not only damages paper, but affects drawings and paintings too. If windows aren't covered with sheer curtains or blinds, avoid placing bookcases and pictures on opposite walls to avoid direct sunlight.

Keep areas around books and papers clean, check the backings on pictures for proper seal. Dirt and air pollutants can cause paper to discolor, become brittle and eventually disintegrate. For these same reasons, pictures should not be hung above working fireplaces where they might attract soot and other residues from the fire.

Insects that feed on the various components of paper like dark, warm and damp areas. With the proper cleaning routine, and insecticides if necessary, the insect problem can be avoided. Always follow instructions carefully when using insecticides.

Lastly, man can damage paper by improper handling. Only the edges of paper should be touched, with clean hands. When viewing unframed pictures, like charcoals or pastels, don't drag anything across their surface.

When placing a mat around a picture, use a high grade cellulose, one of cotton fibers. It helps prevent brown stains on the paper. Wood products are acidic and can damage paper also.

With these few precautions in mind, books and pictures may be enjoyed for many years.

What is the difference

The question has been often asked, what are nitrates and nitrites?

They are naturally occurring substances found in the soil and in plants. They can also be manufactured for use in our food.

Since 1975, nitrates are rarely used. Nitrites — used as a preservative — are severely restricted. A maximum of up to 200 parts per million (ppm) are allowed in some cured meats, while only 150 ppm are allowed in bacon.

To put that into perspective, consider 1 ppm is about 1/32 oz. in one ton of food; 200 ppm would be approximately 3/4 cup in the same ton of food.

Nitrates can react to form nitrites which under certain circumstances (such as high heat) can further react with naturally occurring amines in food to form nitrosamines. These nitrosamines have been known to cause cancerous growths in laboratory animals, but not necessarily in man. Because no one has all the answers, research is still going on in this matter.

In spite of all the controversy, scientists have yet to produce an appropriate substitute. It has been estimated that some 700 compounds have been tried but none have been as effective as nitrite in cured meats.

Nitrite does three main things:

It is used as a preservative, so retards spoilage. Cured meats can be kept — refrigerated — 3 weeks rather than 3 days. This helps keep the cost down too! It also gives the flavor and "pink" color traditionally associated with cured meats.

Most importantly it helps prevent the growth of a particular micro-organism known as clostridium botulinum which produces a deadly toxin.

The toxin, if eaten, attacks the nervous system, so symptoms of double vision, extreme tiredness, difficulty in talking, breathing, precede death.

So you can see the possible risk of cancer outweighs the very real danger of botulism.