

TAMI's Home Media Preservation Guide

Odds are high that you have some sort of audio/visual media in your home. Also likely is that these materials are in danger - film, video tapes and DVDs are fragile and vulnerable to decomposition. From VHS copies of Hollywood films, to those 8mm home movies of the great-grandparents and Hi-8 videos of the kids, this guide offers some simple and inexpensive steps you can take to ensure that your media will last a lifetime and beyond.

STORAGE

Storing your media in the proper containers and conditions will greatly slow deterioration of your items. Ideally, all of your media should be stored in a clean, cool, dry, dark environment. Excessive heat, humidity and light will accelerate the normal deterioration of any media format and quickly destroy film and video. Below are some examples of places to store media inside your home, and some places to avoid:

SAFE FOR STORAGE:

A closet used for clothes

Closets tend to be low in humidity, maintain a stable temperature, and have limited lighting. Avoid pantries, laundry rooms, or other small, enclosed spaces used to store household chemicals.

Under a bed

The area under a bed is typically dark and cool. One thing to be mindful of, however, is that the underside of a bed can become dusty. If you store your media here, invest in covered plastic containers to protect your items from dust.

AVOID:

The Attic

Most attics are not climate controlled and experience dramatic fluctuations in temperature throughout the day. Just as a hot environment is bad for media, so too is an excessively cold one. Attics can also be quite dusty.

The Garage

Like the attic, the garage tends to be dirty and have an unregulated climate. In addition, chemicals in the air from automobiles and household substances typically stored in the garage can create a hazardous atmosphere for media.

Film storage

Storage in proper containers is one of the most basic and effective methods of protecting your film. Whenever possible, store your films in their original containers. If the original cans have been destroyed or damaged (for example, never store film in a rusty can), the best option is to replace them with new cans. If buying new film cans is not possible, a simple plastic bag is still better than nothing. Remember, dust and dirt that collects on your film can permanently scratch or otherwise damage the images.

Small film collections can be stored in frost-free freezers or refrigerators as long as the films are securely sealed in laminate or heavy-duty freezer bags. Storing film at a cold temperature (below 32 degrees Fahrenheit) will actually extend its life.

Special Situations

When storing film, there are a few situations that warrant special attention:

Nitrate film

Nitrate film stock was used for 35mm motion pictures from 1889 – 1951. It is highly flammable (it can burn under water), and should be handled accordingly. If you suspect that you have nitrate film, (it is usually labeled along the side edge), store it in a cool place such as the freezer, and contact a film lab or archive to learn how to properly handle it. Do not try to project the film, and never smoke around it.

Vinegar Syndrome

When acetate film stock begins to decay, it can release acetic acid. This condition is known as "vinegar syndrome," and it can spread to all of the films in your collection. If you have films that smell like vinegar, they should be quarantined from the rest of the collection. Ideally, vinegar "infected" films should be kept far apart from "healthy" films, but quarantine can be as simple as sealing them in plastic bags.

Video Tape Storage

Since all video signals, analog and digital, are written on magnetic tape, keep all tapes as far from magnetic sources as possible. The most common magnetic sources in your home include stereo speakers, televisions, and other home theater equipment (receivers, amps, or subwoofers.) The safest places to store tapes are in areas away from any electronic device that can create an electro-magnetic field or has an electric motor.

If you are not watching or recording a tape, remove it from the player/recorder. Do not leave a tape inside a VCR when it is not in use.

Store video tapes on their end, as you would a book on a bookshelf; do not stack tapes one on top of the other. Uneven pressure on the cassette can deform or warp the tape, rendering it unplayable.

Store your tapes in plastic cases rather than cardboard sleeves.

Frozen storage is not recommended for video tape, films with magnetic sound tracks, or DVDs; the magnetic components of these materials can be damaged by a cold environment.

DVD Storage

Follow the same storage guidelines as for video tape: store the DVDs upright in hard plastic cases, in a clean, cool and dry environment, away from direct sunlight.

HANDLING MEDIA ITEMS

As a general rule, all of your media should be handled as little as possible, with clean hands, and returned to its case or can immediately after use. Below are some tips to help you safely handle specific items.

Handling Film

Ideally, you should not touch your film unless you are going to: a) project it or, b) clean/repair it. When you must handle your film:

Clean the container

If your film has been sitting undisturbed for a long period of time, thoroughly wipe

off any dust or dirt from the film container before opening it. Oftentimes the plastics that comprise the film base have a static charge that will attract any dust particles near it. In addition to making your film look dirty during projection, dirt and dust particles can scratch the film and cause permanent damage.

Hold the film by the edges

Always wash your hands before handling film (especially after cleaning off a dirty container,) and only hold film by the edges. Not only will the oils on your skin leave smudges and fingerprints that affect image quality, they can cause permanent damage. Furthermore, any dirt or dust left on your hands can harm the film.

Clean properly

Film-cleaning is best done by a skilled professional with the proper equipment. If you must clean your film yourself, we strongly urge you to purchase the correct film-handling supplies. Cleaning film without following accepted procedures, or using the right supplies and equipment, could cause far more harm than if you let the film remain dirty.

Handling Video Tape

All video cassettes have a plastic gate on the front of the cartridge that can be lifted to access the tape. NEVER EVER lift this gate and touch the tape behind it. Any care that requires directly touching the tape should be left to a professional.

Handling DVDs

Always handle DVDs by their edges; never touch the shiny side of the disc, and never set the disc down outside of the case. The only safe places for a DVD are inside of a player and inside its case.

If cleaning is necessary, use an ultra-fine polishing cloth and wipe outwards from the center. Never wipe in a circular motion around the disc.

When labeling a blank disc, use only a soft, non-solvent type felt tip pen. Do not use a ballpoint or hard-tipped pen.

DIGITAL TRANSFER

Transferring film and video tapes to a digital format is the best way to preserve the content of your movies long after the original medium has deteriorated. The benefits of digitization include the ability to: migrate to new digital formats as needed, create multiple copies that you can store in different places, and view the videos on your computer without putting wear and tear on the originals.

Film Transfer

Although it is possible to set up a video camera and record movies as they are projected onto a screen, this method does not produce high quality images. For the best results, hire a professional service that will transfer your films using scanning or telecine equipment.

Video Tape Transfer

You may already own all of the equipment necessary to digitize your home video tape collection: a computer, capture software, a digitization device, and a playback device, such as a camcorder or VCR. Most home computers are capable of digitization, and currently the Mac and Windows operating systems come pre-loaded with video capture and DVD creation

programs. Consult the software instruction manual/help file for more information.

Most video cameras come equipped with either a USB or Firewire/iLink/DV cable that connects it to a computer for digitization; usually all you need to do is plug it in and download your video. To digitize video tape from a VCR, you will need a capturing device that connects to your computer and converts the analog signal from the deck to a digital one in the computer. Some video camcorders have an analog to digital feature built in.

After digitization

To protect your digital files from hard-drive failure, make backup copies of your digital files and store them in multiple places. Consider investing in an extra hard-drive or an online storage service. Most importantly, do not throw away the originals! If properly cared for, they will be your highest quality version, and if you lose your DVDs or other digital copies, you will be able to re-transfer the items. Again, DO NOT THROW AWAY YOUR ORIGINALS!!!

Links and Resources

The Association of Moving Image Archivists

<http://www.amianet.org/resources/resources.php>

COOL

"Video Preservation"

<http://cool-palimpsest.stanford.edu/bytopic/video/>

Council on Library and Information Resources

"Magnetic Tape Storage and Handling"

<http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/>

LittleFilm.org

<http://www.littlefilm.org/Primer3.html>

National Film and Preservation Foundation

The Film Preservation Guide

<http://www.filmpreservation.org/>

Texas Commission on the Arts

"Videotape Identification and Assessment Guide"

<http://www.arts.state.tx.us/video/actions.asp>

The Video History Project

"Video Preservation – The Basics"

<http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/preservation/preservation.php3>

STORING YOUR FILMS AND VIDEOS AT HOME



