

FactSheet

Para Su Información

Mercury Exposure

What is mercury and how is it used?

Mercury is a metal that occurs naturally in small amounts in the environment. Because it remains liquid at room temperature, it is used in many consumer products. Mercury is used in barometers, blood pressure instruments, thermometers, and other pressure-sensing instruments. Batteries containing mercury are used in some small electronic devices.

What health problems are associated with exposure to mercury?

Health problems caused by mercury depend on how much has entered your body, how it entered your body, how long you have been exposed to it, and how your body responds to the mercury.

Mercury is harmful to both animals and humans. Children are more susceptible to mercury poisoning than adults. Exposure to even small amounts of mercury over a long period may cause negative health effects including damage to the brain, kidney, lungs, or a developing fetus. Brief contact with high levels of mercury can cause immediate health effects including loss of appetite, fatigue, insomnia, and changes in behavior or personality. Depending on the length or degree of exposure, additional symptoms such as nausea, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, eye irritation, weight loss, skin rashes, and muscle tremors may occur.

When exposure to mercury stops, most symptoms usually go away; however, effects on the brain and nervous system may be permanent. Once mercury has entered the body, it can take months before it is eliminated, mainly through the urine and feces. Levels of mercury can be measured in blood, urine, and scalp hair. These tests may help to predict possible health effects.

How can I be exposed to mercury?

Mercury exposure can occur by breathing vapors, by direct skin contact or by eating food or drinking water contaminated with mercury. Many people are exposed by breathing vapors, which are readily absorbed by the lungs. Mercury can enter the body through the skin, especially if it comes in contact with a cut or wound. If you swallow mercury, very little is absorbed. Most of the mercury is eliminated through the digestive tract.

What should I do if I am accidentally exposed to mercury?

The Clark County Health District assists in responding to mercury spills in homes. The amount of mercury from a typical broken thermometer would be considered a small spill. If more mercury than this is spilled, it would be considered a large spill. Some people save mercury from various sources and store the product in containers. This is dangerous because mercury may escape from broken or improperly sealed containers. Individuals may often be exposed without their knowledge.

Persons involved in a large mercury spill should leave the area immediately. Contact your physician for possible treatment and testing. Contact the Clark County Health District for information concerning air testing and cleanup.

These precautions should be taken if a small mercury spill occurs:

- People not involved in the cleanup should leave the area.
- Minimize tracking by removing shoes and clothing. Assume that the clothes of a child who played with mercury are contaminated. Place clothes in a sealed plastic bag and put them

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outside in a safe place until the household trash can be picked up. Plastic can be placed on the floors to minimize tracking.

- Do NOT use a vacuum cleaner to clean up the spill. A vacuum cleaner will spread the mercury vapors and tiny droplets will settle throughout the area, increasing the spread of contamination and the chance of exposure.
- Windows/doors in the area of the spill should be opened to ventilate the area.
- Small amounts of mercury can be collected with adhesive tape or an eye dropper and stored in a sealed plastic container until disposal.
- After all visible mercury has been collected, use a mercury cleanup kit, available commercially, to clean the spill area and work it into the cracks with a broom or brush. Do not add water. Materials in the mercury spill kit will rapidly bind to the remaining mercury and can be swept up with a broom and dustpan. Wash the area with trisodium phosphate detergent solution, available at home improvement stores, and rinse with water.
- Contaminated carpeting should be removed and discarded, starting with the spill room.

- Contaminated materials and mercury collected from small spills may be discarded along with household trash, but should be placed outside in a safe place until the household trash is picked up.

How can I prevent mercury spills?

Mercury-containing products should be replaced with safer alternatives. Mercury thermometers and blood pressure devices are available in electronic form. Mercury-containing items such as fluorescent bulbs and old electronic switches should be recycled instead of thrown into the household trash.

Where can I get more information?

The Southern Nevada Health District Environmental Health Division, (702) 759-0588.



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Updated 8-06