

Mercury

What is mercury?

Mercury is a naturally-occurring metal which has several forms. Metallic mercury is a shiny, silver-white, odorless liquid. If uncontained, it can evaporate into a colorless, odorless gas. Higher temperatures can cause greater evaporation.

How can people be exposed to mercury?

Mercury is a very toxic or poisonous substance that people can be exposed to in several ways. If it is swallowed, it is mostly passed through your body and very little is absorbed. If you touch it, a small amount of mercury may pass through the skin. Mercury is most harmful when you breathe in the vapors that are released when a container of mercury is open or when a mercury spill occurs.

Who is most affected by mercury exposure?

Pregnant women, infants, and young children are particularly sensitive to the harmful effects of mercury. The younger a child is, the greater the risk of long-term effects of mercury. Mercury in the mother's body can pass to a fetus. It can also pass to a nursing infant through breast milk.

What are the health effects of mercury exposure?

Acute effects that occur soon after exposure to high concentrations of mercury are:

- Headaches, chills, and fever
- Chest tightness and cough
- Hand tremors
- Increased blood pressure or heart rate
- Skin rashes
- Eye irritation
- Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and diarrhea

Effects that may result from chronic or **long-term** exposure to mercury vapor are:

- Permanent brain or kidney damage
- Personality changes
- Decreased vision or hearing
- Memory problems
- Peripheral nerve damage
- Elevated blood pressure

Children are especially sensitive to mercury exposure and are at risk of developing acrodynia, or Pinks Disease, by breathing vapors or other types of exposure. Symptoms of Pinks Disease include:

- Reddening of the palms or soles of the feet
- Itching or peeling skin
- Increasing heart rate and blood pressure
- Behavioral changes
- Muscle weakness
- Sweating and hair loss

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How do I know if I was exposed to mercury?

There are tests that a doctor can do to measure whether you have been exposed to too much mercury. A blood test is the most accurate for recent mercury exposure. A urine test is better for measuring mercury when the exposure has happened over a period of several weeks or more.

What is the treatment for mercury poisoning?

If your tests indicate a large mercury exposure, there are medications that your doctor can prescribe that can help to remove the mercury from your body.

How can I reduce the risk of mercury exposure?

Carefully handle and dispose of products that contain mercury, such as thermometers or fluorescent light bulbs. Do not vacuum up spilled mercury, because it will vaporize and increase exposure. Teach children not to play with shiny, silver liquids. Properly dispose of older medications that contain mercury. Keep all mercury-containing medicines away from children. Pregnant women and children should keep away from rooms where liquid mercury has been used.

What should I do if mercury is spilled in my home?

If mercury has been spilled in your home, seek professional spill response help.

1. Quickly close off the area to people and animals.
2. Call 911 or your local fire department since human health may be adversely impacted.
3. Turn down the temperature or lower the thermostat to below 65° F.
4. Open windows and ventilate the area.
5. Surround and contain the spill. Prevent liquid mercury from running into cracks, crevices, drains, and surface waters. Never pour mercury down the drain. Mercury is heavier than water and may get trapped in the plumbing system
6. Notify state and local authorities. For a release to the environment of one pound or more, it is *mandatory* under federal law to call the numbers listed below:
 - a. National Response Center: 800-424-8802
 - b. Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality, Pollution Emergency Alerting System: 800-292-4706
 - c. Calhoun County Emergency Planning Committee: 269-966-1000

If a compact fluorescent lightbulb (CFL) has been broken in your home, visit this website for instructions on cleaning it up: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch/CFL_Fact_Sheet_193840_7.pdf

How do I get more information on mercury?

Michigan Department of Community Health
Phone: 800-MI-TOXIC

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Environmental Assistance Center
Phone: 800-662-9278
Web Site: www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3307_29693_4175---,00.html

Poison Control Center
Phone: 800-222-1222

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Web Site: www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/mercury/index.asp

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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