# Prevent Mercury Spills.

## Safely handle them if they happen.

Elemental mercury (quicksilver) is a toxin that can be found in a variety of items, such as thermometers, thermostats, blood pressure cuffs, fluorescent bulbs and even some toys or jewelry. When it is spilled, it evaporates and gives off invisible, odorless vapors. Breathing mercury vapors can make you sick. Even though you might not feel sick, mercury can impact the way that your brain and nervous system function.

Walk through your home, work or school and look at items that might contain mercury. If you find something that contains mercury, pack it carefully or talk with your school administrator or supervisor about safe handling and disposal.

If you spill mercury or break a product that contains mercury, follow the tips in this brochure.

## Take immediate precautions to contain the spill.

Do not touch the mercury. Keep people and pets out of the area. Isolate the spill area and prevent the mercury from flowing into drains, cracks or crevices. Turn off heating, ventilating or air conditioning systems that circulate the air internally through the house or building.

## Never vacuum or sweep up the spilled mercury.

The most dangerous exposure to elemental mercury is by breathing its fumes. Vacuuming or sweeping up a mercury spill will spread the mercury throughout the house or building and contaminate your vacuum or broom.

## Get help for large spills.

Large mercury spills should be cleaned up professionally. Call 911 if more than about two tablespoons has been spilled. Describe what happened and ask to be connected with the Department of Ecology Spill Team for your county. The Washington Poison Center (1-800-732-6985) is available to answer your questions about human health and large or small mercury spills.

## Clean up small spills.

Remove all jewelry from your hands since mercury adheres to gold and silver. Put on rubber gloves. Keep your hands away from your face. Find a plastic bag for sealing any item that mercury has touched.

Carefully pick up pieces of broken glass and place them in the plastic bag. Using

the sticky side of duct tape or masking tape (two-inches or wider), pick up any remaining glass and mercury droplets.

- **On a hard surface:** Push the beads of mercury together with a card, stiff paper or squeegee to form larger droplets. Then use two cards, stiff papers or an eyedropper to pick up the droplets of mercury.
- **On carpet:** Cut out the contaminated section. Place it in the plastic bag.
- **In a drain:** Remove the sink trap and pour the contents into a plastic bag.

Use a flashlight to look all around in the area of the spill. The light will reflect off the shiny mercury beads making it easier to see them. Pick up any droplets using the procedure described. Place all droplets and the cards, papers or squeegee used into the plastic bag. When finished, carefully remove your rubber gloves, place them into the bag and tightly seal the bag.

## Dispose of the mercury waste responsibly.

When mercury is improperly disposed of down a drain or into the garbage, it ends up contaminating the environment for years. It eventually ends up in the air we breathe or the fish we eat.

Bring mercury waste to your local household hazardous waste collection program during its hours of operation. Call the Washington State Department of Ecology at 1-800-RECYCLE (1-800-732-9253) to identify the hazardous waste collection program nearest you.

## Washington State Resources

Washington State Department of Health

**Environmental Health Assessments**
1-877-485-7316
www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/oehas

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

**Hazardous Substance Information**
1-800-633-7585
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/EAP/PBT/mercuryplan.html

WASHINGTON POISON CENTER

**Washington Poison Center**
1-800-732-6985

## References


Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). ToxFAQs for Mercury. April 1999. http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html or 1-877-485-7316.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. MMWR. March 18, 1988. Mercury Exposure in a High School Laboratory-Connecticut. 37(10): 153-155.

Lowry, CD et al. 2002. Elemental Mercury Poisoning in a Family of Seven. Fam Comm Health. 4(1): 1ff.

Von Muhlendahl, KE. 1990. Intoxication from Mercury Spilled on Carpets. Lancet. 336(8730): 1578.



Content for this publication was drawn from work of Kittitas County Moderate Risk Waste Facility and Massachusetts Interagency Mercury Task Force.


For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-877-485-7316.


DOH Pub 333-050 11/2002 Ecology Pub 02-03-048