

# Mercury in the Home *fact sheet*

Mercury pollution is a serious environmental threat. Small amounts of mercury can cause serious health problems.



## Why should I be concerned?

Mercury is one of a number of persistent bioaccumulative toxic chemicals (PBTs) that are being targeted to reduce their presence in the environment. Mercury can cause serious ecological and health problems when released to the environment through human activities.

Children are most sensitive to mercury poisoning during early development to age six.

Mercury spilled from broken thermometers or toys collect in carpeting, furniture or other porous surfaces. Children can be exposed and seriously poisoned by breathing invisible vapors released to the air from these contaminated materials.

Mercury is toxic to the nervous system. Short-term high-mercury concentration exposure can result in nausea, shortness of breath, pneumonitis and bronchitis. Exposure to high levels of mercury over an extended time can result in shakiness, tremors, numbness in the fingers and toes, loss of muscle control, memory loss and kidney disease in children and adults.

## Mercury Pollution

Mercury comes from a number of sources, including the commonly found products listed below. Throwing these products in the trash, outdoors, or down drains, can cause mercury pollution in our environment.

For proper disposal, contact New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Additional resources for proper handling and disposing of mercury are found within this *fact sheet*.

- Thermometers (fever, candy, deep fry, oven, indoor and outdoor) are one of the largest sources of mercury in municipal solid waste, contain mercury in the silvery temperature indicator. These items should be wrapped in a plastic bag and securely taped before bringing to a facility for proper disposal. Fortunately, there are safer alternatives, such as digital or alcohol thermometers.
- Fluorescent light bulbs contain mercury because it makes them highly energy efficient. Keep them out of the trash, avoid breakage and dispose of them properly.
- Thermostats contain more than five times the amount of mercury than a typical fever thermometer. Mercury-containing tilt switches have been used in thermostats for more than 40 years. Each switch contains approximately 3 grams of mercury. If you replace a thermostat, dispose of the old one through a household hazardous waste collection program. Mercury-free electronic or digital thermostats are available as replacements.
- Pharmaceuticals, detergents, disinfectants and older medications for psoriasis and eczema often contain mercury. It can also be found in some over-the-counter nasal sprays, hemorrhoidal ointments and contact lens products. Some bleaches and detergents with bleach and stain removers also contain mercury. Read product labels and try to purchase mercury-free alternatives.



### Other sources of mercury in homes:

- Batteries made before 1990;
- Button batteries, like those found in watches, calculators, hearing aids, and some toys;
- Pilot lights in gas appliances such as stoves, water heaters, furnaces, washers, dryers, and heaters;

- Switches found in some fire alarms, septic tanks, car trunks, pinball machines and automatic shutoff irons;
- Latex paint and pesticides made before 1990
- Miscellaneous items such as counterweights in antique clocks, jewelry with glass ampoules, old chemistry sets, vintage toys and pre-1997 athletic shoes with flashing lights.

**If a mercury spill occurs, NEVER do the following:**

**NEVER** use an ordinary vacuum or shop vacuum to clean up mercury. The vacuum will put mercury vapor into the air and increase the likelihood of human exposure. The vacuum cleaner will be contaminated and have to be disposed of as mercury-contaminated waste. Instead, put on rubber or disposable gloves and use an eye dropper or masking tape to pick up beads of mercury. Place in a zip lock baggie and dispose of properly. Dispose of all material that came in contact with mercury, including the eye dropper.



**NEVER** use household cleaning products to clean up mercury, particularly products that contain ammonia or chlorine. These chemicals will react violently with mercury, releasing a toxic gas.

**NEVER** use a broom or a paintbrush to clean up mercury. It will scatter the mercury droplets, making them harder to find and pick up.

**NEVER** pour or allow mercury to go down a drain where it has the potential of impacting the septic drain field. Because mercury is heavier than water, it often accumulates in the S-trap of a drain and continues to emit harmful vapors.

**NEVER** allow people whose shoes or clothing may be contaminated with mercury to move around, further contaminating the area.

**NEVER** wash fabrics heavily contaminated with mercury in a washing machine.

**How do I dispose of the old mercury-containing items?**

Do not place mercury-related items into the trash. Contact your town or county officials for information about hazardous waste disposal in your community. Contact New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Waste Determination and Analysis Section at 518-402-8633 for information about the Rules and Regulations.

**For more information, contact:**

- [www.health.ny.gov/mercury](http://www.health.ny.gov/mercury)
- [www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/285.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/285.html)
- [www.atsdr.cdc.gov](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov)
- [www.epa.gov/mercury](http://www.epa.gov/mercury)
- NYSDEC Spills Hotline 800-457-7 362
- Poison Control Center 800-222-1222

Mercury Spill Kit Suppliers	
Krackeler Scientific	800-334-7725
Lab Safety Supply	800-356-0783
Cole-Parmer	800-323-4340
For schools and businesses only	
Fisher Scientific	800-766-7000
Mallinckrodt/Baker	800-582-2537
Sigma Aldrich	800-325-3010
VWR Scientific	800-932-5000
For schools only	
Flinn Scientific	800-452-1261

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