



# How to Clean Up Mercury Spills in Your Home

## Sources of Mercury in the Home

Mercury metal is a dense silver-gray liquid which may be found in the home in items such as:

- Some thermometers, thermostats, barometers, electrical switches
- Some light bulbs (i.e., fluorescent, high intensity, mercury vapor, metal halides)
- Some athletic shoes, toys, and cards that light up or make noise
- Mercury products brought home as novelty or sold in products in gel form

## Importance of Safe Cleanup

When liquid mercury is spilled, it forms droplets that can accumulate in small spaces and emit vapors into the air. Mercury vapor is odorless, colorless, and very toxic. Children are at highest risk. Pets are also at risk.

The small amount of mercury in a fever thermometer or fluorescent bulb is not likely to cause health problems but should still be cleaned up.

## Isolate the Spill and Ventilate

- Keep people and pets away from the area of the spill
- Close all doors between the spill and the rest of the house
- To minimize vaporization, turn down any heaters, turn-up air conditioners, and turn off fans in the area of the spill. Fans that vent air directly outdoors are OK to use
- Open windows to the outdoors

## Change into Old Shoes and Clothing

Before cleaning up a mercury spill, put on old clothing and shoes that can be thrown away if they get contaminated. Do not wear any jewelry since the mercury may combine with the metal in it. Put on rubber gloves to keep the mercury from getting under your fingernails.

## What NOT to Do if Mercury is Spilled

- ✓ **Do Not** use an ordinary vacuum cleaner to clean up mercury. The vacuum will put mercury vapor into the air and increase exposure. The vacuum cleaner will be contaminated and must be thrown away. Never use a broom to clean up mercury. It will break the mercury into smaller droplets and spread them.
- ✓ **Do Not** pour mercury down a drain. It may lodge in the plumbing and cause future problems during plumbing repairs. If discharged, it can cause pollution of the septic tank or sewage treatment plant.
- ✓ **Do Not** wash mercury-contaminated items in a washing machine. Mercury may contaminate the machine and/or pollute sewage.
- ✓ **Do Not** walk around with shoes that might be contaminated with mercury. Contaminated clothing can also spread mercury around.

**If you are concerned about mercury exposures and possible health effects, please contact your family healthcare provider or the NJ Department of Health at 609-826-4984.**

## You Can Clean Up the Spill by Yourself if:

- The spill is a small amount, less than one or two tablespoons and limited to a small area
- The mercury has not been spread around
- The spill is on a hard surface such as tile, linoleum, or wood that is in good condition
- The spill is on a small porous item which can be thrown away (i.e., area rug, blanket, clothing)

## Hire an Environmental Company to help with the cleanup if the mercury spill:

- Involves a large area and has been spread around
- Is in cracks and crevices or other difficult to clean places
- Is on a non-disposable porous item such as carpeting or upholstery

If mercury gets on your skin, shoes, or clothing, remain still and have someone bring you a plastic trash bag and wet paper towels. Wipe off any visible beads of mercury with the wet paper towels and then put them into the trash bag. Remove contaminated shoes and clothing and place them in a trash bag. Seal that bag with tape and place it in another bag.

## Cleanup Supplies

Everything, even the flashlight, will need to be thrown away if it gets contaminated with mercury.

- Gloves (rubber, nitrile, or latex)
- Large trash bags (4)
- Small zipper top plastic bags (4)
- Paper towels (or napkins, tissues, or toilet paper)
- Tape (wide duct, packing, or masking tape)
- Two pieces of stiff paper, cardboard, or a rubber squeegee
- Flashlight
- Eyedropper

## Resources/References:

List of Environmental Companies:

[www.nj.gov/health/ceohs/documents/childcare/conslt.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/health/ceohs/documents/childcare/conslt.pdf)

US Environmental Protection Agency Mercury website:

<https://www.epa.gov/mercury>

Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry (ATSDR)

Mercury website:

<https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/mercury/index.html>

## Perform the Cleanup

### For small disposable porous items

- Carefully fold the contaminated item (i.e., rug, clothing) so that the mercury is trapped inside it; place it in a large trash bag and seal with tape

### For Hard Surfaces

- Pick up any broken pieces of glass and place them on a paper towel using rubber, nitrile, or latex gloves
- Fold the paper towel, place it in a zipper-top bag, and seal the bag
- Clean up the beads of mercury using a squeegee or cardboard to slowly roll the beads onto a sheet of paper. An eye dropper can also be used to collect the beads. If you use an eye dropper, slowly squeeze collected mercury onto a damp paper towel. Place the paper towel, paper, eye dropper, or anything else that has mercury on it, into a zipper-top bag, and seal the bag
- use the flashlight to look for smaller mercury beads after you remove larger beads; you can use duct tape or masking tape to collect smaller hard-to-see beads

## After the Cleanup

- Wash your hands; take a shower if other parts of your body are contaminated with mercury
- Continue to air out the room for a few days
- You may want to hire an environmental company to test for residual mercury vapors after the cleanup is complete (see **Resources** for list of companies)

## Disposal

- Place all materials used in the cleanup, including gloves, in a trash bag
- Place the zipper-top bags that contain mercury and other objects into the trash bag
- Close and seal the trash bag with tape and place it in a safe place outside your house
- Throw away everything you think may be contaminated with mercury
- Dispose of the trash bags as household hazardous waste (contact your county household hazardous waste facility or local health department for guidance)