



Frequently asked questions and answers about Mercury Exposure

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What is Mercury?

Elemental mercury, often called quicksilver, is a heavy form of the metal mercury that is liquid at room temperature. However, it can quickly change to a gas that is invisible to the naked eye. The gas vapors that are released can quickly fill a room if mercury is spilled or release indoors or in a confined area.

How do I get exposed to Mercury?

If swallowed, like with a broken thermometer, it will pass through your body and very little will be absorbed. If you touch it, a small amount may pass through your skin, but not usually enough to cause harm. Mercury is most harmful when you breathe the vapors that are released when a container is opened or it is spilled.

What are the health effects?

Pregnant women and small children are particularly sensitive to the harmful effects of mercury. The harmful effects depend on how much mercury you were exposed to and how long you were exposed.

Health effects of high concentration exposure include:

- Headaches, fever, chills
- Tightness in the chest, coughs
- Hand tremors
- Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea

Long term health effects of high concentration exposure include

- Personality changes
- Decreased vision and hearing
- 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

Can I get tested to see if I was exposed?

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 to method to determine is there has been exposure. Speak with your physician if you wish to have a blood test performed, however it is usually recommended only for direct exposures. If your test were indicate are large exposure, there are medications your doctor can proscribe that can remove the mercury from your body.

How can I reduce the risk of exposure to mercury?

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. If a large amount of mercury has been spilled, contact your health department. Teach children not to play with shiny, silver liquids. Properly dispose of older medicines 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.

Are there numbers I can call, web sites I can visit to find out more??

There are several ways to get additional information regarding mercury and its health effects. These resources include but are not limited to:

- You can call the poison control center in Michigan at: 1-800-222-1222
- **You can call your local Health department at:**
- Branch County – 517-279-9561 x106
- Hillsdale County – 517-437-7395 x109
- St. Joseph County – 269-273-2161 x231
- Michigan Department of Community Health offers a fact sheet and cleanup guide at the following link:
- www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2945_5105-13050--,00.html
- You can go to the Centers for Disease Control to find out more about mercury, its toxicology and to download a frequently asked questions sheet. The link for this information is: www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/mercury/index.asp

The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Your Community Partner in Public Health

Find us on the web at:

www.bhsj.org

Coldwater
279-9561 x 143

Hillsdale
437-7395 x 125

Sturgis
659-4013 x 109

Three Rivers
273-2161 x 241