



Mercury Exposure

Health Education Facts

What is Mercury?

Mercury is a shiny liquid metal found in thermometers, dental fillings, batteries and in some workplaces and hazardous waste sites. Mercury compounds may be found in some skin creams, antiseptic creams and ointments, and in some fungicides. Mercury compounds by themselves often (but not always) appear as white powders or crystals.

Methylmercury, one of the most common mercury compounds, is sometimes detected in soil and water. It is produced by certain bacteria. Higher levels of mercury in the environment can increase the amount of methylmercury these bacteria make.

How Are People Exposed to Mercury?

People are most commonly exposed to mercury either through breathing mercury vapors or eating foods contaminated with mercury or mercury compounds. Household items containing mercury (such as thermometers and batteries) should be kept away from small children.

Examples of mercury exposure include:

- C Eating seafoods contaminated with methylmercury.
- C Breathing mercury vapors from spills, incinerators, and industries that burn mercury-containing fuels.
- C Release of mercury during medical or dental treatments.
- C Exposure at home through eating, breathing or skin contact (children playing with thermometers, batteries, etc.).

C Exposure in the workplace through breathing or skin contact (dental, health services, chemical, and other industries that use mercury).

C Exposure at or near a hazardous waste site through air, soil or water.

What are the Health Risks of Mercury?

Exposure to mercury or mercury compounds can permanently damage the brain, lungs and kidneys and is dangerous to developing fetuses. Symptoms of mercury poisoning may include irritability, shyness, tremors, changes in vision or hearing, memory problems, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, increases in blood pressure or heart rate, skin rashes, and eye irritation. Whether mercury can cause cancer is undetermined.

Exposure to mercury is more dangerous for children than adults. Consult your physician to determine if you have been exposed to dangerous levels of mercury.

NOTICE: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires that discharges or spills of 1 pound or more of mercury be reported.