



Toxic Chemical Series

HOUSEHOLD MERCURY SPILL CLEAN UP OPTIONS

Mercury is also known as: Quicksilver, Liquid Silver.

Its chemical reference number (CAS) is : 7539-97-6

Department of Health and Family Services Publication # PPH-7143

Department of Natural Resources Publication # RR-629

WHAT IS MERCURY?

Mercury is a heavy, shiny, silvery-white poisonous metal that is a liquid at room temperature. Mercury can be found in thermometers, barometers, thermostats, dental offices, blood-pressure devices, fluorescent light bulbs and even in some tennis shoes that light up. Liquid mercury evaporates at room temperature and gives off harmful, invisible, odorless vapors. Mercury is a fast-moving liquid and spreads quickly, so promptly containing and controlling both the liquid and its vapors are very important.

Breathing mercury vapors is most harmful to people, but mercury can also be harmful when swallowed or when it contacts broken skin. Our bodies do not absorb liquid mercury very well through unbroken skin.

HOW CAN I PREVENT MERCURY SPILLS?

Replace mercury-containing products with safer alternatives. Electronic thermometers and blood-pressure devices are available that won't spill liquid mercury. Also, recycle all mercury-containing items such as fluorescent bulbs and old electrical switches instead of throwing them in the trash.

HOW SHOULD I DEAL WITH SPILLED MERCURY?

Get people out of the spill area immediately. Keep uninvolved people and pets away until the spill is completely cleaned up. Blow fresh air into the area to dilute the mercury's invisible, odorless, harmful vapors. If you can, determine how much mercury was spilled. If you are unsure about how best to proceed, or if you are worried whether people have been exposed to mercury vapors, call your local Poison Control Center, local fire department HAZMAT team or the Department of Health and Family Services' 24-hour answering service at (608) 258-0099 for advice. Report the spill to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) by calling the 24-hour hotline at 1-800-943-0003.

Do not try to vacuum up spilled mercury with an ordinary household vacuum cleaner - it will only make more vapors and spread poisonous mercury vapors all over the house!

FOR SMALL SPILLS

Small spills are those involving less than a dime-sized puddle of mercury metal. These small spills can be scooped up using a small, disposable dustpan or sucked up using a syringe or an eye dropper, but this method doesn't deal with the vapor problem. Safety equipment, if available, should include disposable liquid-proof gloves and eye protection.

The most effective way to clean up mercury spills is to first spread sand, clay or sawdust in a circle around the spill to stop the mercury from spreading. Then add an “amalgamating” powder to the spill to make the mercury solid and reduce evaporation. (Mercury clean up kits containing amalgamating powders are available through safety supply companies and from some local health departments.) Once the mercury spill turns into a solid amalgam (a few minutes), the vapor hazard is reduced and the material can be easily picked up and put in a sealed plastic bag.

FOR LARGE SPILLS

Mercury spills larger than a dime-sized puddle should be handled by hazardous material cleanup professionals or an environmental cleanup contractor. Check your local yellow pages or call your regional DNR office for help in finding a professional cleanup contractor.

HOW WILL I KNOW ALL THE MERCURY IS GONE?

People trained to handle small spills can use commercial “mercury indicating” powders. These indicating powders change color overnight when they touch liquid mercury. If the surface where the mercury was spilled has many gaps or cracks, such as carpeting or wood, some of the mercury may be very difficult to find and remove.

For larger spills, air monitoring should be done as part of the environmental cleanup contractor’s procedure. Once all visible mercury has been cleaned up, the contractor will monitor the air in the area to determine whether harmful vapor levels are gone.

HOW SHOULD I DISPOSE OF MERCURY WASTE?

All mercury waste should be put into a vapor-proof, sturdy unbreakable container to prevent re-spreading the contamination if the container is dropped. Plastic jars or other thick-walled plastic bottles work well. Anything that touched or held the liquid mercury, including anything used to clean up the mercury, should also be considered contaminated and may need to be disposed of as mercury waste. Only testing by a qualified professional can determine whether clothing and other items are safe to keep.

Most mercury waste should not be put into the regular trash. Call your regional DNR office for advice on disposal options that will keep the mercury contamination from spreading and also satisfy state and local laws.

Seek medical advice if you have any symptoms that you think may be related to mercury exposure.

This fact sheet summarizes information about this chemical and is not a complete listing of all possible effects. A separate fact sheet on liquid mercury is available from the Wisconsin Division of Public Health at the address below. For more information, contact the local Poison Control Center (the number is on the inside cover of most phone books), your local public health agency, the Wisconsin DNR World-Wide Website at <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/aw/rr/spills/index.htm> or the Wisconsin Division of Public Health, P.O. Box 2659, Madison, Wisconsin 53701-2659; Phone (608) 267-2987.

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