

## Mercury Fact Sheet with Cleanup Instructions

This fact sheet answers questions about cleaning up metallic mercury, also known as elemental mercury, from thermometers and light bulbs. Small mercury spills are often a nuisance but not an emergency. Metallic mercury is a silver-colored liquid at room temperature. When spilled this liquid mercury often puddles or beads. It will also evaporate into the air. Do not vacuum a mercury spill. Vacuuming will cause the mercury to evaporate faster, which might make the situation worse. When cleaned up properly, a mercury spill should not be a health hazard to you or your family.

### How can mercury affect my health?

The amount of mercury in a typical fever thermometer is not enough to cause health problems.

The effect of exposure to any chemical depends on the amount to which you are exposed (dose), the length of time you are exposed (duration), and how you are exposed (route).

The human body's nervous system is very sensitive to all forms of mercury. Breathing mercury vapors can harm the nervous system, the lungs, and the kidneys. Mercury vapors pass easily from the lungs into the blood stream. Eating or touching metallic mercury will not harm a person. The small amount of mercury in an ordinary fever thermometer or fluorescent light bulb will not harm a person if it is cleaned up properly.



### What do I do if I have breathed in or accidentally eaten mercury?

Call your local Poison Control Center: 1-800-222-1222

### Who can I call if I have general questions about mercury or cleanup?

Call the TN Department of Health's Communicable & Environmental Disease Services: 615-741-7247

### What happens to mercury when you break a thermometer?

In an old thermometer, the mercury is a shiny, silver-colored liquid. When a thermometer is broken, the liquid mercury can spill out. The liquid mercury may puddle together or splatter into tiny metallic beads. Because mercury slowly evaporates at room temperature, mercury vapors will get into the air.

### How do I clean up the mercury from a broken thermometer?

Keep people and pets away from the area until the cleanup is complete. Do not vacuum up the mercury. Vacuuming mercury may help spread the mercury.

Open the windows to ventilate the area to the outdoors. Using a fan to increase air circulation to the outdoors will also help with ventilation. Leave the area for a few minutes before returning to begin the cleanup.

Remember to be careful with the broken glass! Sometimes the sharp glass is the biggest hazard.

Remove any metal jewelry before cleaning up mercury. Gloves are not required, but wearing kitchen or work gloves is a good idea to protect your hands from the broken glass. A flashlight can be helpful to find the shiny beads of spilled mercury. Sometimes the liquid mercury really spatters. Other times the mercury stays inside the thermometer or in a small puddle.

#### ***If on a hard surface:***

Use two stiff pieces of paper, such as index cards or playing cards, to gently push the beads together. Then scoop up the balls of mercury. You may also try to pat the area with the sticky side of duct tape, packing tape, or masking tape to pick up small beads of mercury. Put the collected mercury, as well as all materials used in its cleanup, in a glass jar or hard plastic container with a screw top lid. Bag the container for proper disposal. A damp, disposable rag or paper towel should then be used to do a final wipe of the area. As an extra precaution, continue to ventilate the area for several hours.

### ***If on a carpet or rug:***

Clean the mercury up as above. If it is difficult to gently push the balls of mercury through the pile of the carpet or rug, try using a medicine or eye dropper to pick up the mercury. Inexpensive rugs can be discarded. An expensive rug can be taken outside of the house for several days to air out.

### ***If all the mercury cannot be picked up from a carpet:***

- Gently work an absorbent material into the carpet (Capture ® Carpet Cleaner, kitty litter, etc.).
- Leave it alone for ½ to 1 hour.
- Open the windows to ventilate the area to the outdoors.
- In this case, vacuum the area and immediately take the vacuum cleaner bag outside to the garbage can.
- Ventilate the area the next several times you vacuum the carpet.

### **What happens to mercury when you break a light bulb?**

Light bulbs such as fluorescent tubes and compact fluorescent light bulbs contain a tiny amount of elemental mercury. You will not likely see any spilled mercury from a light bulb as you might with a thermometer. In light bulbs, most of the mercury is an invisible vapor or a powder. Any mercury vapor in the bulb will get into the air. Mercury powder will likely remain with the broken glass.

### **How do I cleanup a broken mercury-containing light bulb?**

Keep people and pets away from the area until the cleanup is complete. Open the windows to ventilate the area to the outdoors. Using a fan to increase air circulation to the outdoors will also help with ventilation. Leave the area for a few minutes before returning to begin the cleanup.

Remember to be careful with the broken glass! Sometimes, the sharp glass is the biggest hazard. Instead of vacuuming, sweep the broken glass with a broom. Collect the broken glass and other parts. You may pat the area with the sticky side of tape to pick up fine particles. If you have to use a vacuum cleaner, be sure to empty the vacuum cleaner bag in an outside trash can afterward.

A damp, disposable rag or paper towel should then be used to do a final wipe of the area. Put everything into a sturdy container or plastic bag. Keep it closed. Just to be safe, continue to ventilate the area for several hours.

### **How do I dispose of the collected mercury?**

Take it to the household hazardous waste disposal site in your county. Some counties such as Davidson, Hamilton, Knox, and Shelby have permanent sites to accept the mercury waste. Other counties may have special household hazardous waste collection days. Call 1-888-891-8332 to find the location and day for your county.

**- OR -**

If you cannot safely store the mercury for proper disposal, then double bag the jar or bag containing the mercury and broken glass and place it into the outside garbage. If the amount of mercury is greater than what is in a fever thermometer, please call 1-888-891-8332 for help with proper disposal.

### **What if the mercury got on clothes?**

If the mercury got onto your clothes, you can wash them. Start by hanging the clothes outside for a few days to air out. Wash the clothes with laundry soap and dry them.

### **What do I do if the mercury cannot be cleaned up immediately?**

- Cover the mercury spill area with a piece of plastic wrap.
- Open a window and use a fan to ventilate the room with the mercury spill.
- Keep children and pets out of the room until cleanup is done.

### **What do I do if I spilled more mercury than that in a thermometer or CFL or what if the mercury went someplace besides a hard surface or a carpeted floor?**

Call the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation at 1-888-891-8332 or the Tennessee Department of Health's Communicable and Environmental Disease Services at 615-741-7247. If you witness a large mercury spill, call your local Hazardous Materials (HazMat) unit. They are usually located within the local Fire Department.