

Mercury – Recycling and Management of Breakage and Spills

All mercury's are quite toxic. Each form exhibits different health effects ranging from tremors, mood changes, headaches, nausea, vomiting and even kidney damage, depending upon how acute the exposure has been. Knowing what products contain mercury, handling them carefully, recycling them when possible and knowing what to do in case of breakage and spills will limit the risk of mercury exposure to you, your family and the environment.

There are three forms of mercury: Elemental mercury, inorganic mercury compounds and organic mercury compounds (usually methyl mercury).

Elemental Mercury may be found in household products such as thermometers, barometers, home blood pressure gauges and switches such as those found in irons, washing machines and top-loading freezers. It is also found in fluorescent and neon lamps, and “button” (watch) batteries. Mercury use is being discontinued in hearing aid batteries.

Inorganic Mercury was used in the past in latex paints, soaps, laxatives and skin crèmes. These uses as well as most agriculture and pharmaceutical uses of inorganic mercury have been discontinued in the USA except for the use of mercuric chloride in disinfectants and pesticides.

Methyl Mercury has no industrial uses, it is formed in the environment from methylation of inorganic mercurial ion and is found primarily in fish and fish products.

Clean up and disposal of mercury spills:

Small spills (household thermometer size):

Do NOT touch the mercury or try to vacuum it up or sweep with a broom. DO open windows and close off doorways to the immediate area of the spill making sure children and animals cannot gain access, leave the room for at least 15 minutes because mercury vapors are very toxic. Immediately contact **911**, McKean County's Emergency Management Agency, for safety instructions and assistance. Our EMA has specialized equipment for cleaning up small mercury spills.

Large spills (over a teaspoon): Ventilate and secure the area, leave the area and immediately call our Western Region DEP toxic spills specialists at **814-332-6945** (during business hours) or at **800-373-3398** (24 hour hot line) for safety and clean up instructions.

The following EPA link on what **never** to do with a mercury spill and safe clean up procedures can be accessed by clicking here:

<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/spills/index.htm>

Recycling sealed household mercury products: The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection provides recycling services for sealed household mercury products in conjunction with County Recycling Coordinators. This includes sealed/unbroken thermometers, barometers, and mercury switches found in blood pressure gauges, irons, heaters, washing machines, freezers and button batteries. This collection does **NOT** include fluorescent and neon lamps.

For arrangement of pick up or delivery of sealed mercury household products in McKean County, call the McKean County Recycling Program at (814) 887-4004 or e-mail mjwilliams@mckeancountypa.org

Information provided by: The US Environmental Protection Agency Technology Transfer Network Air Toxics Website