

How do I clean up a spill from a broken mercury thermometer?

DOs

- ✓ Keep all people and pets away from the area of spillage.
- ✓ Open windows to increase ventilation.
- ✓ Dispose all clothing and shoes properly if they become contaminated.
- ✓ Remove all jewellery because mercury can adhere to metal.
- ✓ Put on gloves, preferably rubber ones.
- ✓ Pick up the mercury with an eye-dropper or scoop up mercury beads with a piece of heavy paper (e.g., playing card).
- ✓ Place the mercury, contaminated clothing, instruments (dropper / heavy paper) and any broken glass in zipped plastic bags.
- ✓ Wash your hands and take a shower afterwards.
- ✓ Leave windows open for at least two days to make sure that the area is completely ventilated.
- ✓ Dispose of the mercury wastes properly.



DON'Ts

- ✗ Sweep the area with a broom which will break the mercury into smaller droplets. This makes the mercury evaporate faster and more difficult to be cleaned up.
- ✗ Use vacuum cleaner to clean up the mercury. Vacuuming speeds up vaporization of the mercury into the air. The vacuum cleaner will also become contaminated and continue to release mercury vapour for a long time.
- ✗ Pour mercury down a drain. It may stay in the plumbing.
- ✗ Wash mercury-contaminated clothing by using a washing machine.
- ✗ Walk around in mercury-contaminated shoes or clothings.
- ✗ Use household cleaning products to clean the area of spillage, particularly products that contain ammonia or chlorine. These chemicals will react violently with mercury, releasing a toxic gas.



What You Need To Know About Mercury



香港中毒防控網絡
Hong Kong Poison Control Network



What is mercury?

- Mercury is a naturally occurring element. There are three different forms of mercury: metallic mercury, organic mercury compounds and inorganic mercury compounds.
- Metallic mercury is a heavy, odourless, silver-coloured liquid. It is commonly used in mercury thermometers, blood pressure measuring devices and fluorescent light bulbs.
- Organic mercury compounds are present in nearly all fish in trace amounts. Long-lived, larger fish that feed on other fish may contain higher levels. This is the most common source of exposure to mercury in our daily life.
- Inorganic mercury compounds are released into the air from burning of coal and incineration of waste. They are occasionally found in skin lightening creams and some folk medicines.



How may I be exposed to mercury?

- Broken mercury thermometers: Thermometers with a silver line contain metallic mercury, while those with a red or blue liquid usually do NOT contain mercury. Unintentional swallowing of liquid mercury from broken thermometer usually causes no health effects. The body does not readily absorb metallic mercury. However, the spilled liquid readily evaporates at room temperature and can produce toxic fumes if it is not thoroughly cleaned up.
- Eating seafood: Though fish and shellfish usually contain trace amounts of organic mercury, consumption of fish is recommended as it is a good source of high quality protein and low in saturated fat. For most people, the risk of mercury poisoning by eating fish is NOT a health concern. However, women who may become pregnant, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children should avoid consuming excessive amount of fish with high mercury content e.g. sword fish, shark and tuna.
- Using skin lightening creams and folk medicines: these may contain inorganic mercury compounds and can cause mercury poisoning
- Work in industries that use mercury e.g. ore processing and mining.

How can mercury affect my health?

- Typically, low-level exposure to mercury does not lead to lasting health effects and treatment is not necessary.
- Exposure to high levels of mercury may result in damage to the lungs, kidneys and cause adverse effects to the nervous system, particularly the developing brain. Foetuses, infants and young children are most sensitive to such toxic effects.

Is there a medical test to show that we have been exposed to mercury?

- In the absence of a significant exposure history, routine screening to rule out mercury poisoning is unnecessary.
- Specific tests for the presence of mercury in blood and urine can be used to assess the level of exposure. Your doctor can take samples and send them to the laboratory for testing.
- The use of hair as a sample for heavy metal analysis is not recommended as hair is subjected to environmental contamination and its testing may lead to misdiagnosis.

How is mercury poisoning treated?

- Medication can be administered to help bind the mercury and increase its elimination.
- The medication has side effects and should only be prescribed when mercury poisoning is confirmed by specific blood and urine tests.