

Mercury Fact Sheet



Mercury is a naturally occurring metal in the earth's crust, found in the air, water, and soil. Human activities, which are the main source of mercury releases, include combustion of fossil fuels (mainly coal); burning of municipal and hazardous waste; and mining and manufacturing processes. Mercury exists in several forms: 1) metallic/elemental mercury (shiny, silver-white, odorless liquid, or gas); 2) inorganic mercury compounds or "salts" (usually white powders or crystals); and 3) organic mercury compounds, which are formed when mercury combines with carbon. Organic mercury compounds (methylmercury) can enter and accumulate in the aquatic food chain. Everyone is exposed to some level of mercury. Eating fish and shellfish which contain high levels of methylmercury is the major source of the general population's exposure to this compound. Applying mercury-containing personal care products such as beauty creams may result in high mercury exposure. Breathing air containing metallic mercury vapors may occur in some workplaces using metallic mercury, or when mercury is spilled or released due to broken thermometers or cultural or religious practices/rituals. Mercury levels in the outdoor air and drinking water are usually so low that they are not important sources of exposure to the general population.

Mercury is found in:

- Some foods, including large predatory fish (such as shark and swordfish) may contain high levels of methylmercury.
- Dental silver amalgam fillings.
- Some personal care products such as skin lightening creams, some antiseptic creams and/or ointments.
- Some traditional therapies, cultural practices, and religious rituals (e.g., metallic mercury called azogue used in Voodoo, Palo, Santeria, or Espiritismo).
- Some household products, such as glass thermometers, batteries, electrical switches, and fluorescent light bulbs.
- Some industrial processes, such as chloralkali, gold extraction, mercury recycling, batteries manufacturing, or dental offices where dental amalgam fillings are used.
- Outdated fungicides, antiseptics, disinfectants, and paints.
- Outdated medicines (laxatives, worming medications, teething powders).
- Some imported jewelry.

Possible health concerns from excessive exposure to mercury:

- Neurological and behavioral problems may result from inhalation of metallic mercury vapor and ingestion of organic mercury (methylmercury), as well as ingestion or skin application of inorganic mercury products (such as creams, ointments, or teething powders).
 - o Symptoms may include muscle tremors, irritability and nervousness, emotional instability, sleeplessness, headaches, decline in memory and thinking skills, "pins and needles" sensation in the limbs and around the mouth, muscle weakness, movement difficulty, and visual and hearing problems.
- Exposure to inorganic forms of mercury or inhalation of mercury vapor may affect the way kidneys function.
- Unborn and young children are especially vulnerable to long-term or repeated exposure to mercury, which may result in neurodevelopmental deficit ranging from developmental delay to more severe effects including mental retardation.
- We do not know how common these diseases are among the general population of the state. Furthermore, we cannot determine with available data what level of exposure to mercury would cause these diseases to develop.

Possible actions one can take to reduce excessive exposure to mercury:

- Properly handle and dispose of products that contain mercury, such as fluorescent light bulbs and thermometers.
- Teach children not to play with shiny, silver liquids, and products that contain mercury.
- Learn about mercury advisories for fish and shellfish consumption to determine when and which fish are safe to eat (see resources below).
- Ask your dentist about alternatives to silver dental amalgam fillings.
- Do not use skin lightening, anti-acne, or anti-aging creams unless you are sure they do not contain mercury.
- Never vacuum spilled liquid metallic mercury.
- If you work with mercury, take all precautions to avoid bringing mercury-containing dust home on your clothing, skin, hair, or tools.

For more information, visit: <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/tp46.html> or <http://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring> or <https://nmtracking.org/environment/Mercury.html> or <http://www.4csbc.org/pages/mercury.html>

To find a list of products that may contain mercury, and resources for disposing of mercury, visit: <http://www.epa.gov/mercury>

To learn about fish consumption advisories, visit: <http://www.epa.gov/fish-tech>, for here in NM: <https://nmtracking.org/environment/FishConsumption.html> or www.env.nm.gov/swqb/advisories/

For any other questions, please call 1-888-878-8992

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