



Mercury

Mercury is found naturally in the environment in several forms. In its elemental form, mercury is best known as the silver liquid in thermometers. It can be combined with other elements to form inorganic compounds. Mercury can evaporate to form colorless, odorless mercury vapor. Mercury can combine with organic material to form organic compounds such as methylmercury, which is produced primarily by bacteria.

Exposure at work is possible when you breathe air that is contaminated with vapors from metallic mercury spills, such as when thermometers or blood pressure cuff monitors are broken.

It is possible to be exposed to metallic mercury from mercury released from dental fillings, however the amount of mercury released from dental fillings is generally extremely low. Prolonged exposure to mercury can damage the kidney and central nervous systems, as well as cause birth defects.

Mercury in the organic form of methylmercury is of greatest concern, and the common routes of exposure are ingestion or skin absorption. It is of particular concern because it can accumulate at high levels in some fish, and these fish may then be consumed by people. FDA regulations prohibit the sale of commercial fish that are found to have high levels of methylmercury. Also, state and federal authorities issue public health advisories to warn people about eating fish caught from local waters that are contaminated with mercury.

Mercury devices should never be near cloth surfaces, such as upholstered chairs or over carpeted floors. If a spill occurs in these areas, the upholstery or carpeting may need to be replaced. Children should never be left unattended near these devices.

Substitutes for mercury-containing medical devices should be used whenever possible, e.g. thermometers and BP cuff monitors. Efforts are underway to remove as much mercury from OHSU as possible.

If you would like assistance with selecting substitutes and proper disposal of mercury, contact Environmental Health and Safety at 503 494-7795.

If a spill occurs, evacuate the room or immediate area and phone Public Safety at-4-4444. Spill response staff is on call 24-hours a day for cleanup. **Do NOT attempt to clean-up a mercury spill yourself!** Never use rags or a vacuum, as this will only disperse the mercury and increase vapors. Mercury is a regulated hazardous waste, and must be disposed of through Environmental Health and Radiation Safety.

