

Mercury Spill Management

If the mercury spill is the result of a single broken thermometer or a similar small amount of mercury, follow these procedures. **If there is more mercury, contact your local health department and have them advise you on the appropriate response.**

Immediately after a spill keep all people away from the spill area. To minimize the mercury that vaporizes, turn off any heaters and turn up any air conditioners. Ventilate the area by opening windows and, when possible, keep open for at least two days.

Never use a vacuum to clean up a mercury spill. Not only will the mercury contaminate your vacuum; the heat from the vacuum will evaporate the mercury, further distributing it throughout the house. Similarly, never use a broom to clean up mercury. It will only distribute the mercury into smaller beads, and will contaminate the broom.

Assemble the necessary supplies before attempting a clean up. These include gloves, an eyedropper, and two stiff pieces of paper or cardboard, two plastic bags, a large tray or box, duct tape or packing tape, a flashlight and a wide mouth container. A mercury spill kit contains all the materials you will need. Remember that any tools used for clean up should be considered contaminated and disposed of with the mercury. Do not touch the mercury. Remove all jewelry and watches from your hands as mercury will bond with the metal. Put on gloves, preferably rubber gloves to minimize contact with mercury. Use the flashlight to locate the mercury. The light will reflect off the mercury beads and make them easier to find.

Clean up the spill. Different surfaces require different clean up procedures.

On a hard surface or tightly woven fabric use stiff paper to push beads of mercury together. Use the eyedropper to suction the beads of mercury, or working over the tray to catch any spills, lift the beads of mercury with the stiff paper. Carefully place the mercury in a wide mouth container. Pick up any remaining beads of mercury with sticky tape and place contaminated tape in a plastic bag along with the eyedropper, stiff paper, and gloves. Label the bag as mercury waste. Place this bag and sealed container in the second bag. Label it as mercury waste and call your State agency for appropriate disposal.

On a carpet or rug, the mercury-contaminated section should be cut out. This cut-out section, along with all cleanup items, should be placed in a plastic bag. Label it as mercury waste and call your State agency for appropriate disposal.

In a sink of water, mercury will sink to the bottom. Remove as much water without disturbing the mercury and recover the mercury with an eyedropper. Place in a wide mouth container, close the lid and seal it with tape. Label it as mercury waste and call your State agency for appropriate disposal.

In a drain, mercury will get caught in your sink trap. Working over a tray, remove the trap and pour the contents into large mouth container. Close the container lid and seal with tape. Label it as mercury waste and call your State agency for appropriate disposal.

(Excerpted from Mercury Thermometers and Your Family's Health by Health Care Without Harm)