



Summit County Public Health

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Guidelines for Handling a Small Mercury Spill

Mercury is present in a number of forms in the environment. Spills most commonly occur with elemental mercury. It is a shiny, dense, silver-gray metal that is a liquid at room temperature.

Liquid mercury can be found in items such as:

- Thermometers, thermostats, barometers, and electrical switches
- Silver dental fillings and some medical equipment
- Light bulbs such as fluorescent, high intensity, mercury vapor, metal halide and high-pressure sodium
- Clock pendulums
- Athletic shoes and toys that light up
- Gel capsules used in folk medicine, sometimes known as “azogue”
- Older homes and building where jars of mercury remain, left over from earlier applications when the dangers of handling mercury were not well-known

When liquid mercury is spilled, it disperses into tiny round droplets. As it is exposed to the air, it emits a vapor that is odorless, colorless and *very toxic*. Under normal conditions, a small mercury spill will pose little risk to your health *if the proper steps are taken*.

Small spills are those that are two tablespoons or less. If a spill is larger, if the mercury has been tracked through a home or building, or if the mercury has spread into difficult to clean areas, do not attempt to handle the problem yourself. Contact a professional company that is skilled in the removal of mercury.

When a small spill occurs:

- Immediately isolate the area. Have all people leave the room and open windows to facilitate ventilation.
- If the mercury has come in contact with your skin and/or clothing, have someone bring you wet paper towels and a garbage bag. Use the paper towels to wipe off all visible mercury from your skin and place the paper towels and any contaminated clothing into the garbage bag. Shower well.
- Gather a pair of rubber gloves, a flashlight, Ziploc baggies, large garbage bags, wide-mouth plastic or glass containers with lids, eye dropper, stiff sheets of cardboard and duct tape.
- If the mercury has spilled in a heated device, allow it to cool *completely* before beginning the clean up. Warmer temperatures cause mercury to emit vapors at a much faster rate.
- Remove jewelry.
- Put on gloves.
- If the mercury has spilled onto an absorbent material, the material must be discarded. Carefully place the material into a Ziploc or container with lid, making sure to contain the mercury.