



## Mercury

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For **KIDS**

## Mercury Spills

When liquid mercury (also known as elemental or metallic mercury) is spilled, it forms droplets that can accumulate in the tiniest of spaces and then emit vapors into the air. Mercury vapor in the air is odorless, colorless, and very toxic. Most mercury exposures occur by breathing vapors, by direct skin contact or by eating food or drinking water contaminated with mercury.

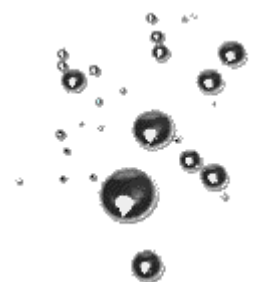
Health problems caused by mercury depend on how much has entered your body, how it entered your body, how long you have been exposed to it, and how your body responds to the mercury. All mercury spills, regardless of quantity, should be treated seriously.

## Cleanup Instructions

There are three different procedures to address mercury spills.

\* [\*What never to do with a mercury spill.\*](#)

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## What NEVER to do with a mercury spill

- **Never** use a vacuum cleaner to clean up mercury. The vacuum will put mercury into the air and increase exposure. The vacuum appliance will be contaminated and have to be thrown away.



- **Never** use a broom to clean up mercury. It will break the mercury into smaller droplets and spread them.
- **Never** pour mercury down a drain. It may lodge in the plumbing and cause future problems during plumbing repairs. If discharged, it can cause pollution of the septic tank or sewage treatment plant.
- **Never** wash mercury-contaminated items in a washing machine. Mercury may contaminate the machine and/or pollute sewage.
- **Never** walk around if your shoes might be contaminated with mercury. Contaminated clothing can also spread mercury around.


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## Spills: Less than or equal to the amount in a thermometer

### Tips

- Remove everyone from the area where cleanup will take place. Shut door of impacted area. Turn off ventilation system. DO NOT allow or gain assistance from children. Remember to remove all pets as well.
- Mercury can be cleaned up easily from the following surfaces: wood, linoleum, tile and any other like surfaces.
- If a spill occurs on carpet, curtains, upholstery or other like surfaces, these contaminated items should be thrown away in accordance with the disposal means outlined below. Only cut and remove the affected portion of the contaminated carpet for disposal.

 <b>Check List</b>
<b>Items needed to clean up a small mercury spill</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. 4 to 5 ziplock-type bags</li><li>2. trash bags (2 to 6 mm thick)</li><li>3. rubber or latex gloves</li><li>4. paper towels</li><li>5. cardboard or squeegee</li><li>6. eyedropper</li><li>7. duct tape, or shaving cream &amp; small paint brush</li><li>8. flashlight</li><li>9. powdered sulfur (optional)</li></ol>

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## Cleanup Instructions

1. Put on rubber or latex gloves.
2. If there are any broken pieces of glass or sharp objects, pick them up with care. Place all broken objects on a paper towel. Fold the paper towel and place in a zip lock bag. Secure the bag and label it as directed by your local health or fire department.
3. Locate visible mercury beads. Use a squeegee or cardboard to gather mercury beads. Use slow sweeping motions to keep mercury from becoming uncontrollable. Take a flashlight, hold it at a low angle close to the floor in a darkened room and look for additional glistening beads of mercury that may be sticking to the surface or in small cracked areas of the surface. Note: Mercury can move surprising distances on hard-flat surfaces, so be sure to inspect the entire room when "searching."
4. Use the eyedropper to collect or draw up the mercury beads. Slowly and carefully squeeze mercury onto a damp paper towel. Place the paper towel in a zip lock bag and secure. Make sure to label the bag as directed by your local health or fire department.
5. After you remove larger beads, put shaving cream on top of small paint brush and gently "dot" the affected area to pick up smaller hard-to-see beads. Alternatively, use duct tape to collect smaller hard-to-see beads. Place the paint brush or duct tape in a zip lock bag and secure. Make sure to label the bag as directed by your local health or fire department.
6. **OPTIONAL STEP:** It is **OPTIONAL** to use commercially available powdered sulfur to absorb the beads that are too small to see. The sulfur does two things: (1) it makes the mercury easier to see since there may be a color change from yellow to brown and (2) it binds the mercury so that it can be easily removed and suppresses the vapor of any missing mercury. Where to get commercialized sulfur? It may be supplied as mercury vapor absorbent in mercury spill kits, which can be purchased from laboratory, chemical supply and hazardous materials response supply manufacturers.  
  
**Note:** Powdered sulfur may stain fabrics a dark color. When using powdered sulfur, do not breathe in the powder as it can be moderately toxic. Additionally, users should read and understand product information before use.
7. If you choose not to use this option, you may want to request the services of a contractor who has monitoring equipment to screen for mercury vapors. Consult your local environmental or health agency to inquire about contractors in your area. Place all materials used with the cleanup, including gloves, in a trash bag. Place all mercury beads and objects into the trash bag. Secure trash bag and label it as directed by your local health or fire department.
8. Contact your local health department, municipal waste authority or your local fire department for proper disposal in accordance with local, state and federal laws.
9. Remember to keep the area well-ventilated to the outside (i.e., windows open and fans running) for at least 24 hours after your successful cleanup. Continue to keep pets and children out of cleanup area. If sickness occurs, seek medical attention immediately. EPA's Mercury Web site presents information on [health effects related to](#)

[exposures to vapors from metallic mercury.](#)

For additional information on health effects, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) provides a [Mercury Fact Sheet](#) EXIT Disclaimer that also presents information on health effects related to exposures to vapors from metallic mercury.

**Recommendation:** If there are young children or pregnant women in the house, seek additional advice from your local or state health or [state environmental agency](#).

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## Spills: More than the amount in a thermometer

### Cleanup Instructions:

1. Isolate the area.
2. Turn down temperature.
3. Open windows.
4. Don't let anyone walk through the mercury.
5. Don't vacuum.
6. Contact your local or state health or [state environmental agency](#).

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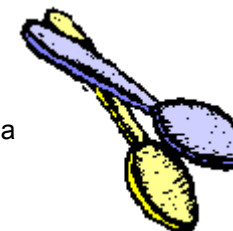
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### Caution:

The general public can clean up small mercury spills no greater than the amount contained in a thermometer from flat surfaces. If you estimate your mercury spill to be greater than the amount in a thermometer, isolate the contaminated area and call your local or state health or [state environmental agency](#).

## Spills: Greater than One Pound (Two Tablespoons)

Any time one pound or more of mercury is released to the environment, it is mandatory to call the [National Response Center \(NRC\)](#) EXIT Disclaimer. The NRC hotline operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call (800) 424-8802. Note that because mercury is heavy, only two tablespoons of mercury weigh about one pound



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## State Links

Many states provide more detailed step-by-step instructions on how to contain a mercury spill and, in the case of small spills, how to clean it up yourself, as well as on available cleanup contractors and proper disposal of collected mercury. Examples are:

The links below may take you out of the EPA.gov domain and to external links. [EXIT Disclaimer](#)



[About PDF Files](#)

- [Basic Questions Dealing with Mercury Spills](#)  
Illinois Department of Public Health
- [Mercury Spill Information and Cleanup Guidance](#)  
Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM)
- [Guidelines for the Safe Cleanup of Mercury Spilled in the Home](#) (PDF, 4 pages, XX KB)  
New Jersey Department of Health
- [Cleaning Up Small Mercury Spills](#)  
Michigan Department of Environmental Quality

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## Additional Resources

### Mercury Response Guidebook

The *Mercury Response Guidebook*, by EPA's Emergency Response Team and [EPA Region 5](#), is designed to assist emergency and remedial professionals coordinate and clean up indoor mercury spills. The principles in this guidebook can also be used at other mercury-contaminated sites.

#### Contents:

- [Cover, Table of Contents, Emergency Notification](#) (PDF, 5 pages, 381 KB)
- [Chapter 1: General Information](#) (PDF, 5 pages, 286 KB)
- [Chapter 2: Referral](#) (PDF, 8 pages, 398 KB)
- [Chapter 3: Reconnaissance](#) (PDF, 13 pages, 351 KB)
- [Chapter 4: Relocation \(Temporary\)](#) (PDF, 11 pages, 521 KB)
- [Chapter 5: Removal](#) (PDF, 21 pages, 1,029 KB)
- [Chapter 6: Replacement](#) (PDF, 9 pages, 615 KB)
- [Chapter 7: Reoccupation](#) (PDF, 5 pages, 118 KB)

**Attachments:**

- **[Attachment A:](#)** Speech Notes from Thomas A. Baughman, Ph.D. (Illinois Department of Public Health) on Indoor Air Quality and Elemental Mercury (PDF, 20 pages, 179 KB)
- **[Attachment B:](#)** Guidelines for Responding to Mercury Spills and Releases in Schools and Residences (PDF, 10 pages, 103 KB)
- **[Attachment C:](#)** EPA letter to State EPA and Health Departments - Mercury Response Matrix (PDF, 4 pages, 74 KB)
- **[Attachment D:](#)** EPA Emergency Response Team's modification of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Method 6009 (PDF, 20 pages, 402 KB)
- **[Attachment E:](#)** ATSDR Suggested Action Levels for Indoor Mercury Vapors in Homes or Businesses with Indoor Gas Regulators (PDF, 5 pages, 233 KB)

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URL: <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/faq/spills.htm>