

Household Waste Management

Household Hazardous Waste - Mercury-Containing Devices

Information presented in this fact sheet is intended to provide a general understanding of the regulatory requirements governing the management and disposal of household-generated mercury-containing devices. This information is not intended to replace, limit, or expand upon the complete regulatory requirements found in Division 14 of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management Administrative Code.

Sources of Mercury

Mercury metal is a dense, silver-gray liquid that vaporizes at room temperature and may be found in the home in such items as thermometers, thermostats, barometers, electrical switches, some batteries, some lamps (including fluorescent tubes), some clock pendulums, and some athletic shoes that light up. Mercury vapor in the air is odorless, colorless, and toxic.

Environmental Effects

Health problems associated with exposure to mercury depend on how much has entered your body, how it entered your body (skin contact, ingestion, inhalation), and how long you have been exposed. Exposure to even small amounts of mercury over a long period may cause negative health effects including damage to the brain, kidney, lungs, and a developing fetus. Brief contact with high levels of mercury can cause immediate health effects including loss of appetite, fatigue, insomnia, and changes in behavior or personality.

DO NOT:

- ! Use household cleaning products to clean a spill of mercury, particularly products containing ammonia or chlorine. These chemicals will react with mercury to release a toxic gas.
- ! Use a broom or paint brush to clean up mercury. Trying to sweep up the spill will break the mercury into smaller beads and spread them around.
- ! Use an ordinary home or shop vacuum cleaner. This disperses mercury vapor into the air and increases the likelihood of exposure. The mercury may also leave a residue in the machine; each time you use it, it may release more mercury vapor.
- ! Pour mercury down a drain or wash mercury-contaminated items in a washing machine. Upon discharge, it can contaminate the septic tank or sewage treatment plant.
- ! Burn mercury or mercury-containing items.

For a Small Spill, Clean Up by Following These Steps:

- 1) Close the room off from the rest of the house and increase ventilation in the room if possible.
- 2) Open the windows. Put a fan in one window to pull the vapors outside.
- 3) Pick up the mercury with an eyedropper or scoop up beads with a piece of heavy paper (e.g., index card). Small amounts of mercury may also be collected with adhesive tape.
- 4) Place the mercury and contaminated items (dropper, heavy paper, tape, broken glass, etc.) in a plastic zipper bag. Place this bag in a second zipper bag, and the second in a third zipper bag. Finally, place the bags in a sealable plastic container.
- 5) If mercury comes in contact with your skin, wipe off visible beads with a wet paper towel and place the paper towels and any contaminated clothing in a plastic trash bag. Seal the trash bag with tape, then shower well.

Disposal**

Currently, in the State of Alabama, waste generated by a household is exempt from regulation as a hazardous waste. Although a municipal landfill is an acceptable method of disposal for small spills, other options for disposal of mercury and mercury-containing items, such as **household hazardous waste collection programs** and **recycling**, should be investigated in order to divert thermometers, thermostats, and other mercury-containing items away from land disposal.

**** This information does not apply to wastes generated by business and/or industry.**

Additional Information

ADEM's Home Medical Waste Fact Sheet:

<http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/diabetes/assets/ADEMHomeMedicalWasteDisposal.pdf>

US Environmental Protection Agency - Household Hazardous Waste: <https://www.epa.gov/hw/household-hazardous-waste-hhw>

US EPA - Mercury in your Environment (guidance on how to avoid it, what to do if it is released): <https://www.epa.gov/mercury>

The Alabama Department of Public Health (<http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/>) has a list of lakes and streams where the fish may be impacted by mercury or other toxins: <http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/tox/fish-advisor.html>.