

Mercury & Schools – Frequently Asked Questions

Information for staff and administrators

Q: What is mercury?

A: Mercury is a dense silvery liquid metal that is used to extract gold from mines or produce amalgam dental fillings. Mercury is also used in batteries and switches to conduct electricity, and in thermometers and barometers as it responds to change in temperature and pressure.

Q: How does mercury find its way into the environment?

A: Mercury doesn't disappear if it is dumped down the drain or thrown in the trash – it finds its way into the environment where it can seep into lakes, rivers and creeks. Pollution of our waterways puts fish, wildlife and human health at risk.

Q: How can mercury affect human health?

A: Mercury exposure can lead to a variety of health problems including damage to the nervous system, brain, liver, lungs and kidneys. Children under age 5 are most sensitive to mercury toxicity because their brains and nervous systems are still developing and can be irreversibly damaged by mercury exposure.

Q: Where can mercury be found at a school?

A: Mercury and mercury-containing items can be found in several locations within a school, including science laboratories, the nurse's office, art classrooms and other classrooms, facilities and grounds.

Q: What mercury-containing items are commonly found in school facilities?

A: They include elemental mercury, laboratory chemicals (i.e. mercury oxide, mercury chloride), laboratory thermometers, fever thermometers, barometers, switches, thermostats, gauges, wood stains, ceramic glazes and old fungicides/pesticides.

Q: What can you do to eliminate mercury in your school?

A: Properly dispose mercury and mercury-containing items you have in your school facilities. Purchase only mercury-free alternatives for use in the school as required by California law. Removing mercury from the school will reduce the potential for a mercury release in the facilities.

Q: What are some mercury-free alternatives for schools:

A: There are many adequate substitutes for mercury-containing items used in schools. For example:

- In science labs, alcohol or digital thermometers can be used as an alternative to mercury lab thermometers.
- In art classrooms, lead and cadmium-free glazes can be used as an alternative to ceramic glazes.
- In the nurse's office, digital fever thermometers can be used instead of mercury thermometers.
- For all school facilities, non-mercury sealed switches and programmable/non-programmable electronic devices can be used as an alternative to mercury thermostats.

Q: How do I handle fluorescent light bulbs?

A: Schools in California are currently required by the state to recycle or properly dispose of used fluorescent light bulbs. If your school does not have a program for handling fluorescent light bulbs there are two options for properly disposing of the light bulbs. You can contract with a hazardous waste handler or, if you qualify, you may have an option of taking them through the Conditionally Exempt Small Quality Generator program operated under a household hazardous waste collection center.

Q: How can I be prepared for a mercury spill?

A:

- Develop procedures for handling a mercury spill in your school.
- Purchase a mercury spill kit capable of handling a small spill. Know where the spill kit is located and how to use it.
- Know how to properly dispose of collected mercury.
- DO NOT use a vacuum cleaner or broom to clean up a mercury spill. This causes mercury to vaporize into the air, potentially creating greater health risks.
- DO NOT pour mercury down the drain. Mercury is heavier than water, which may cause it to get trapped in the plumbing system and continue to vaporize.

Q: Where can I go for additional information?

A: Contact Be Mercury Free, a regional partnership for mercury pollution reduction, at (916) 875-6644, or visit www.bemercuryfree.net.

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A Regional Partnership for Mercury Pollution Reduction