

# Mercury Spill Talking Points

If a mercury spill has occurred in your school, parents will likely be concerned about any possible danger to their children. Other community members also could be affected by a mercury spill — especially if it's a large spill.



Here are some recommended talking points to incorporate in your key messages when you talk to a concerned parent or community member after a mercury spill:

## Mercury Basics

### What is mercury and why is it dangerous?

- Mercury is a metal found naturally in the environment.
- Elemental (metallic) mercury is a shiny, silver-colored liquid that's been used to make many different kinds of products — like glass thermometers, fluorescent (CFL) lamps and light bulbs, and medical and science equipment.
- If a product with mercury in it breaks and the mercury spills out, it can turn into poisonous vapors (fumes) that can be breathed in.

### How can mercury affect my health?

- Mercury poisoning can affect the nervous system, lungs, and kidneys. Breathing in mercury vapors over time may cause symptoms like:
  - Feeling anxious or tired
  - Not feeling hungry
  - Memory problems
  - Trembling (shaking)

## Responding to the Mercury Spill

### How much mercury spilled?

If the amount of mercury that spilled was less than (or equal to) what's in a thermometer (the type that you use to take your temperature):

- This was considered a **small spill**, and we were able to handle the cleanup on our own.
- Although this was a small spill, even a small amount of mercury can be dangerous.
- We followed our school mercury policy to make sure our students and teachers were safe.
- We will involve members of the community in efforts to prevent mercury spills in the future.

If the amount of mercury that spilled was more than what's in a small thermometer (the type that you use to take your temperature):

- This was considered a **medium or large spill** — which requires the help of professionals — and we called for help.
- Professionals have been involved in the spill cleanup. We have also reported the spill to the correct health and environmental agencies.
- We followed our school mercury policy to make sure our students and teachers were safe.
- We will involve members of the community in efforts to prevent mercury spills in the future.



# Mercury Spill Talking Points

## Keeping Your Child Safe from Mercury Poisoning

### Is my child going to be okay?

- It's unlikely that your child will have health problems if he breathed in mercury vapors (fumes) for a short period of time during or after the spill.
- Breathing in mercury vapors is dangerous but not much gets into your body by touching it.
- Health problems usually happen only if a person breathes in:
  - A lot of mercury vapors over a short period of time
  - Lower levels of mercury vapors over a longer period of time

### How do I know if my child needs testing?

- It's unlikely that your child will need to have her urine or blood tested for mercury because it's unlikely that she breathed in enough mercury vapors to affect her health.
- We will notify you right away if the health department recommends testing for your child.

Whether or not to have your child tested is your decision. If you are worried that your child was poisoned by mercury, it may be a good idea to talk to your doctor.

### When can my children return to the area where mercury spilled?

- Professionals will check the spill area to make sure that the mercury levels in the air aren't too high.

- The school will let students back in the spill area when the professionals tell us that it's okay.

## Dealing with Items that Touched Mercury

### What will the school do with clothes, shoes, backpacks, or other items that might have touched mercury during the spill?

- The professionals who handled the spill will collect all items that might have mercury on them.
- They will scan the items to find out if they could be dangerous.
- While some of the items that have mercury on them may be cleaned, others will need to be thrown away.

### What should I do with clothes, shoes, backpacks, or other items that might have touched mercury during the spill that my child brought home?

- If your child has brought clothes or any other items with mercury on them into your home, place them in a bag and seal it shut. Place the bag into another bag, seal it shut, and put the bags outside.
- Contact your health department, environmental agency, or local collection program to find out how to get rid of the materials safely — or to have them checked.
- Clothes or other items that might have touched mercury should never be washed by hand or in a washing machine. If you try to clean the items yourself, you could spread the mercury.

# Mercury Spill Talking Points

## Mercury Spill Cleanup

### How did you clean up the spill?

#### If the spill was small:

- We cleared out the room right away and closed it off from the rest of the school. Then we aired out the room and cleaned up the spill using a spill kit.
- We used a flashlight to check the cracks in the floor and walls. That way, we could be sure that we didn't miss any mercury during the cleanup.

#### If the spill was large:

- We cleared out of the room right away and closed it off from the rest of the school.
- We reported the spill to the correct health and environmental agencies right away.
- Professionals handled the spill cleanup. They also got rid of any materials that might have mercury on them and checked the spill area to make sure the mercury levels aren't too high.

## Preventing Future Mercury Spills

### What is the school doing to prevent mercury spills in the future?

- We will be doing an audit of the school to identify any products that contain mercury.
- Once we have found the sources of mercury, we will:
  - Replace them with safer alternatives that don't contain mercury
  - Work with professionals to safely get rid of products with mercury

Explain any other actions that your school will take, such as involving the community in efforts to protect students and staff from the dangers of mercury in the future.

