

Mercury (Hg) Patient Information Sheet

This handout provides information and follow-up instructions for persons who have been exposed to elemental mercury.

What is elemental mercury?

Elemental mercury metal is a very heavy, shiny, silver-white, odorless liquid at room temperature. It is used to make many different kinds of products including electrical switches, batteries, and medical devices such as thermometers. It is used in industry to manufacture chlorine and process gold ore. The body does not readily absorb liquid mercury through the skin or stomach. However, the liquid evaporates at room temperature, especially when heated. If inhaled, mercury vapors can be highly toxic.

What immediate health effects can be caused by exposure to elemental mercury?

Inhaling high concentrations of mercury vapor can cause a cough, chills, fever, and shortness of breath, and sometimes nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. These symptoms do not usually develop immediately: they might appear a few hours after exposure. Symptoms might resolve or gradually progress to cause serious damage to the lungs and kidneys. Unintentional swallowing of liquid mercury usually causes no health effects.

Can elemental mercury poisoning be treated?

Typically, low-level exposure to elemental mercury leads to no lasting health effects and treatment is not needed. Severely affected individuals must be hospitalized.

Are any future health effects likely to occur?

A single small exposure from which a person recovers quickly is not likely to cause delayed or long-term effects. After a serious exposure, damage to the lungs, kidneys, and central nervous system might occur.

What tests can be done if a person has been exposed to elemental mercury?

Specific tests for the presence of mercury in blood and urine can be useful to assess the level of exposure. If a severe exposure has occurred, x-rays and blood and urine tests might show whether or not the lungs and kidneys have been damaged. Testing is not needed in every case.

Where can more information about elemental mercury be found?

If the exposure happened at work, you might be required to contact your employer and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Employees may request a Health Hazard Evaluation from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

You can obtain more information about mercury from your regional poison control center; your state, county, or local health department; the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); your doctor; or a clinic in your area that specializes in occupational and environmental health. Ask the person who gave you this form for help in locating these telephone numbers.

Follow-up Instructions

Keep this page and take it with you to your next appointment. Follow *only* the instructions checked below.

- Call your doctor or the Emergency Department if you develop any unusual signs or symptoms within the next 24 hours, especially:
- coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, or shortness of breath
 - excessive saliva (spit)
 - decreased urine or change in color
- No follow-up appointment is necessary unless you develop any of the symptoms listed above.
- Call for an appointment with Dr. _____ in the practice of _____.
When you call for your appointment, please say that you were treated in the Emergency Department at _____ Hospital by _____ and were advised to be seen again in _____ days.
- Return to the Emergency Department/ _____ Clinic on (date) _____ at _____ AM/PM for a follow-up examination.
- Do not perform vigorous physical activities for 1 to 2 days.
- You may resume everyday activities including driving and operating machinery.
- Do not return to work for _____ days.
- You may return to work on a limited basis. See instructions below.
- Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke for 72 hours; smoke may worsen the condition of your lungs.
- Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages for at least 24 hours; alcohol may worsen injury to your stomach or have other effects.
- Avoid taking the following medications: _____
- You may continue taking the following medication(s) that your doctor(s) prescribed for you: _____

- Other instructions: _____

- Provide the Emergency Department with the name and the number of your primary care physician so that the ED can send him or her a record of your emergency department visit.
 - You or your physician can get more information on the chemical by contacting: _____
_____ or _____, or by checking out the following Internet Web sites: _____; _____.

Signature of patient _____ Date _____

Signature of physician _____ Date _____