

Mercury Quick Facts

Cleaning up Mercury Spills in Your House

If a thermometer or other small mercury-containing item such as a thermostat or compact fluorescent light bulb breaks, you may be able to clean it up yourself. Follow the steps in this flier to clean up the spill. If the mercury spill is larger than two tablespoons, follow the instructions in this flier and get professional help to clean up the spill.



What NEVER to Do When Cleaning Up a Mercury Spill

- **Never use a vacuum cleaner or broom to clean up the spill.**
A vacuum cleaner or broom will break the mercury into smaller drops and spread it around more. Tiny mercury droplets will settle throughout the area, increasing the spread of the mercury in the room. The droplets will evaporate faster and increase your chance of breathing high levels of mercury vapor. They will be harder to clean up.
- **Never pour mercury down a drain.**
The mercury can become lodged in the “p” traps and may continue to vaporize into the room. Mercury can also pollute septic tanks or wastewater-treatment plants.
- **Never allow people who are wearing mercury-contaminated shoes or clothing to walk around the house.**
This will help limit the spread of spilled mercury.
- **Never use a washing machine to launder clothing or other items that may have come in contact with mercury.**
Mercury can contaminate the washer and/or pollute sewage. Throw all clothing that came in contact with liquid mercury in the trash. If mercury is visible on the clothing take it to your local household hazardous waste collection site for disposal. Wash clothing or other items that were exposed to mercury vapor during the cleanup, but did not get mercury directly on them.

“In no case should a vacuum cleaner or broom be used to remove mercury. This will spread the mercury over a larger area and will put mercury vapors into the air and increase your chance of breathing high levels of mercury vapors.”



How to Clean up a Small Mercury Spill

(a broken thermometer, thermostat or compact fluorescent bulb)

Step 1. Isolate the spill and ventilate the area right away.



- The person who will clean up the spill should have everyone else, **especially children**, leave the spill area, including pets. Don't let anyone walk through the mercury on their way out.
- Open all windows and doors that open to the outside of the house.
- Close all doors between the room where the mercury was spilled and the rest of the house.
- Close all cold air returns so that mercury vapor is not carried throughout the house.
- Turn down heaters and turn up single-room air conditioners, but **don't** use central air conditioning.
- Use fans to blow mercury-contaminated air outside. Turn off fans that do not blow air to the outside.

Step 2: Get the items needed to clean up a small mercury spill.



You will need the following items:

1. 4 or 5 zipper-top plastic bags
2. trash bags (2 to 6 mm thick)
3. rubber, nitrile or latex gloves
4. paper towels
5. cardboard or squeegee
6. eye dropper
7. duct tape, or shaving cream and small paint brush
8. flashlight
9. powdered sulfur (optional)

Step 3: Cleanup Instructions



- Put on rubber, nitrile or latex gloves.
- Pick up any broken pieces of glass and place them on a paper towel. Fold the paper towel, place it in a zipper-top bag, and seal the bag.
- **Clean up the beads of mercury.** Use a squeegee or cardboard to slowly roll the beads onto a sheet of paper. An eye dropper can also be used to collect the beads. Slowly squeeze mercury from the eye dropper onto a damp paper towel. Put the paper towel, paper, eye dropper, or anything else that has mercury on it, into a zipper-top bag, and seal the bag.
- After you remove larger beads, put shaving cream on top of a small paint brush and gently blot the affected area to pick up smaller hard-to-see beads. You can also use duct tape or masking tape to collect smaller hard-to-see beads. Place the paint brush or tape into a zipper-top bag.

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Step 3 continued...



- It is **OPTIONAL** to use commercially available powdered sulfur to absorb 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 it helps to keep mercury that may have been missed during the cleanup from vaporizing into the room. Mercury spill kits that contain sulfur can be purchased from laboratory, chemical and hazardous materials response supply manufacturers. Read and understand how to use the cleanup kit before using. **Note:** Powdered sulfur may stain fabrics. Also, when using powdered sulfur, avoid breathing in the powder as it can be moderately toxic.

Step 4: Look for mercury that may have been missed during the cleanup.



- 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 cracks. **Note:** Mercury can move surprising distances on hard and flat surfaces, so be sure to carefully inspect the entire room when you are searching.

Step 5: Remove contaminated carpet and throw away.



- Place outside the house in a safe place until household trash is picked up.

Step 6: Remove mercury from shoes, clothing, and skin.



- If mercury had touched your skin, shoes or clothing, remain still and have someone bring you a plastic trash bag and wet paper towels. Wipe off any visible beads of mercury with the wet paper towels and then put them into the trash bag. Remove contaminated shoes and clothing and place them in a trash bag. Seal that bag and place it in another bag.

Step 7: Properly dispose of contaminated cleanup materials.



- Place all materials used in the cleanup, including gloves, in a trash bag. Place the zipper-top bags that contain mercury and other objects into the trash bag. Close and seal the trash bag and place it in a safe place outside your house. Label the bag as directed by your local health or fire department.

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Step 7 continued...



- Contact your local health department, municipal waste authority, or your local fire department for proper disposal in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

Step 8: Following the spill



- Keep the area well ventilated to the outside (i.e., windows open and fans in exterior windows running) for at least 24 hours after cleaning up the spill. Continue to keep pets and children out of the cleanup area. If anyone gets sick, call your doctor or the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 immediately.
- You may want to hire 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.
- If young children or pregnant women are in the house, seek additional advice from your local or state health or environmental agency.

What to Do for Mercury Spills Greater Than the Amount in a Thermometer, Thermostat or Compact Fluorescent Light Bulb

Mercury is heavy. Just two tablespoons weigh nearly one pound. If more than the amount of mercury in a thermometer or thermostat or a compact fluorescent light bulb is spilled in your house, be sure to follow these steps:

- Have everyone else leave the area; don't let anyone walk through the mercury on their way out.
- Open all windows and doors to the outside.
- Turn down the heater in winter and turn up the air conditioner in summer.
- Shut all doors to other parts of the house, and leave the area.
- Call your local or state health or environmental agency for help.

If more than two tablespoons of mercury are spilled in your house, you are strongly urged to call the National Response Center (NRC), available 24 hours a day, 1-800-424-8802.