

Mercury - ToxFAQs™

What is mercury?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element with a chemical symbol of Hg. Elemental mercury is a silver liquid at room temperature that can also evaporate into the air as a gas or become a solid at very low temperatures. It can combine with other substances to form solid compounds that are categorized into two groups: inorganic mercury salts and organic mercury compounds. Mercury and mercury compounds are odorless.



Mercury is used in a number of industries and products. It is primarily used in the manufacture of electronics, fluorescent-lighting, and production of chlorine-caustic soda. It is also used in dental products (fillings), although uses in dentistry are being phased-out. Other historical uses of mercury (batteries; thermometers and other scientific and medical devices; electronic switches and lighting applications; paints and pigments; fungicides and pesticides) have been eliminated or drastically reduced.

What happens to mercury in the environment?

Because mercury is a naturally occurring element, it can be found in the air, water, or soil. It can also be found in the environment due to industrial releases to air and water. Industrial releases to air have steadily decreased over the past few decades.

Mercury does not break down in the environment. In air, mercury may spread far from where it was released. Mercury seldom appears as a silver liquid in the environment. In water, mercury can evaporate into the air. In soil, it can adhere (stick) to soil and sediments (dirt deposits at the bottom of bodies of water). One type of organic mercury compound called methylmercury can build up in plants and fish.

How can I be exposed to mercury?

Most people are exposed to organic mercury compounds (typically methylmercury) in food (such as fish, seafood, rice) or to elemental mercury from dental fillings. Food is the most common form of exposure. Most people are not exposed to inorganic mercury salts. Industrial and dental workers who use mercury are primarily exposed to elemental mercury. Some cultures use mercury in traditional medicines or religious practices, although this is not recommended or approved for use in the United States.

How can mercury affect my health?

All forms of mercury can affect the nervous system and the kidneys. Workers exposed to elemental mercury vapor and people who eat foods with high levels of methylmercury experienced tremors, incoordination, impaired vision, impaired learning and memory, and mood changes. Some children born in communities that ate food with high levels of organic mercury had learning, sensory, and movement problems. In people exposed to high levels of methylmercury in their diets, birth defects have occurred.

Some humans and animals that ate mercury compounds had high blood pressure and alterations in their immune systems. Animals that breathed elemental mercury vapor or ate organic or inorganic mercury compounds in their diets showed nervous system effects and/or kidney damage. Animals that ate high levels of mercury compounds showed decreased fertility and/or birth defects.

Mercury can affect the nervous system and kidneys. The health effects from exposure to mercury depend on a number of factors including the amount and form of mercury, route and length of exposure, and age.

Mercury

Can mercury cause cancer?

Rats that ate an inorganic mercury compound for a long period of time developed stomach or thyroid cancer. Rats and mice that ate organic mercury compounds for a long period of time developed kidney cancer.

The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(DHHS\)](#) has not evaluated the potential of mercury or mercury compounds to cause cancer in people.

The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#) has determined that mercuric chloride (inorganic mercury salt) and methylmercury (organic mercury compound) are possible human carcinogens (cause cancer). The EPA did not classify the potential of elemental mercury to cause cancer in humans.

The [International Agency for Research on Cancer \(IARC\)](#) classified methylmercury compounds as possibly carcinogenic to humans. IARC designated inorganic mercury and elemental mercury as not classifiable for causing cancer in humans.

Can I get a medical test to check for mercury?

Mercury can be measured in your blood, urine, hair, or toenails. However, tests cannot determine which form of mercury you were exposed to. Tests also cannot predict whether you will have health problems. If you think you have been exposed to mercury, call your doctor, nurse, or poison control center.

How can I protect myself and my family from mercury?

People should avoid eating fish that contain high levels of methylmercury. This is particularly important for pregnant women and children. Follow your state's health advisories that tell you about whether it is okay to eat fish or wildlife caught in contaminated areas. Avoid all contact with spills of the liquid form of elemental mercury (the type of mercury found in old thermometers). If a spill occurs, refer to <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/dontmesswithmercury> for safe clean-up practices. Most people don't need to take any special steps to avoid exposure to inorganic mercury salts in their daily lives. Keep children from playing in areas near hazardous waste sites to avoid coming in contact with mercury.

For more information:

Call **CDC-INFO** at 1-800-232-4636, or submit your question online at <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/dcs/ContactUs/Form>

Go to ATSDR's Toxicological Profile for Mercury: <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/ToxProfiles/ToxProfiles.aspx?id=115&tid=24>

Go to ATSDR's Toxic Substances Portal: <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/index.aspx>

Find & contact your ATSDR Regional Representative at http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/DRO/dro_org.html

