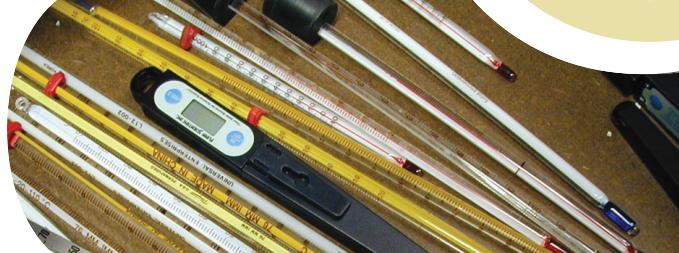




# Elemental Mercury

U.S. EPA | PUBLIC HEALTH OUTREACH AT EPA NEW ENGLAND

**EPA SCIENTISTS** seek to provide citizens and regulators with information about pollutants or naturally occurring compounds linked to health problems. As part of our mission to protect human health, EPA provides important information about types of health problems caused by substances in the environment, how likely is it that people will experience problems when exposed, and how severe this harm may be.



## INTRO:

Mercury is a naturally occurring element in the Earth's crust. This pure mercury, also called elemental mercury, is a shiny, silver-white metal that, at room temperature, is a liquid metal. Mercury, sometimes called "quicksilver", volatizes (is converted into a colorless, odorless gas or vapor) when it is heated. Mercury can be found in some consumer products like thermometers and thermostats, switches, certain types of light bulbs, batteries, and is also found in blood pressure instruments, some jewelry, and even in skin-lightening creams. Elemental mercury also sometimes is used in religious practices. Mercury used for these purposes is called azogue.

## RISK TO HUMAN HEALTH:

The most common path of exposure to elemental mercury is breathing mercury vapor. Exposure occurs when elemental mercury or products containing elemental mercury break or spill, releasing mercury into the air, particularly in warm or poorly-ventilated spaces. Exposure occurs when humans breathe mercury vapors which then are absorbed into the lungs. Although elemental mercury is not readily absorbed by the skin or stomach, humans still can be exposed when handling mercury by inhaling vapors.

Exposures to mercury can negatively impact the human nervous system and severely harm the brain, heart, kidneys, lungs, and immune system. Short-term exposure to high levels of elemental mercury vapors may cause negative health impacts including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, high blood pressure or rapid heart rate, skin rashes, eye irritation, as well as irritant effects to the respiratory system and lungs, including coughing and sore throat. Long-term health impacts depend on the amount and length of time of exposure to elemental mercury. High levels of exposure can result in damage to the central nervous system, liver and kidney damage, respiratory failure, and death. People concerned about their exposure to elemental mercury should consult a physician.

## USE OF MERCURY OR AZOGUE:

Mercury is extremely dangerous to human health and should be avoided. Persons who use elemental mercury, or azogue, for religious practices may be at particular risk of exposure. Mercury should never be played with or used by children for science projects or experiments. Mercury should never be ingested. Products containing mercury should be stored and handled responsibly to reduce risk of human exposure.

## SPILLS, DISPOSAL, RECYCLING:

Spills from broken thermometers or mercury-containing light bulbs, should be cleaned up and properly disposed of immediately following EPA recommended guidelines for safe handling of mercury. Instructions for cleaning up spills, storing, transporting and disposing of mercury can be found at [www.epa.gov/mercury/spills](http://www.epa.gov/mercury/spills). Any time one pound (the equivalent of two tablespoons) or more of mercury is released into the environment, it is mandatory to call the National Response Center hotline at 800-424-8802.

Other important mercury contacts are **MA Department of Environmental Protection Mercury Hotline** (866-9Mercury), **MA Department of Public Health Bureau of Environmental Health** (617-624-5757), **Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry** (800-232-4636), and **American Association of Poison Control Centers** (800-222-1222).

## KEY CONTACTS:

### JERI WEISS

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## GENERAL INFO:

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[www.epa.gov/region1/](http://www.epa.gov/region1/)

### TOLL-FREE CUSTOMER SERVICE

1-888-EPA-7341

### LEARN MORE AT:

[www.epa.gov/region1/eco/mercury](http://www.epa.gov/region1/eco/mercury)