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News Releases from Region 9

Don't Mess With Mercury

Release date: 10/06/2009

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U.S. EPA, ATSDR make available mercury poisoning prevention PSA for kids

Twitter Pitch: @eparegion9 Mercury poisoning prevention video: protect children from dangers of mercury

<http://bit.ly/No3Eu> #EPAMercury

(SAN FRANCISCO) – As part of Children's Health month, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry today launched its "Don't Mess with Mercury" video in an effort to protect children from the dangers of mercury. Every year, the EPA responds to numerous mercury spills that are primarily caused by children playing with mercury. The EPA's cost for cleanup can range anywhere from \$3,000 to \$300,000 or more. The cost to the environment, and in some cases human health, is not quantifiable.

What is elemental mercury? Elemental, or metallic, mercury is the shiny, silver-gray metal found in thermometers, barometers, thermostats and other electrical switches. Mercury can break into droplets when spilled, spread easily, and can build up in tiny cracks and spaces wherever it is spilled.

How can people be exposed to mercury?

When elemental mercury is spilled, or a device containing mercury breaks, the spilled mercury can vaporize and become an invisible, odorless toxic vapor. This is especially true in warm, poorly-ventilated rooms or spaces. If mercury is spilled onto a hot surface, such as a hot surface in a laboratory, mercury will vaporize very quickly and can be more dangerous. Exposure can last a long time if the spill is not cleaned up promptly and properly. Breathing mercury vapors is the most common way to be exposed to elemental mercury, and is the most harmful to health. If mercury is swallowed, most of it passes through the body and very little is absorbed. A small amount may pass through skin from touching mercury for a short period of time, but typically not enough to cause harm.

Sources of mercury in schools:

- Glass thermometers
- Thermostats
- Blood pressure devices in medical offices
- Mercury switches
- Gauges: manometers, barometers, vacuum gauges
- Bulk elemental mercury in science laboratories
- Fluorescent lamps
- Mercury brought to school

What to do and what not to do with a mercury spill, such as a broken thermometer or fluorescent light bulb:

<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/spills/index.htm#fluorescent>

Health effects and symptoms from exposure to mercury include:

Tremors, emotional changes (e.g., mood swings, irritability, nervousness, excessive shyness), insomnia, neuromuscular changes (such as weakness, muscle atrophy, twitching), headaches, disturbances in sensations, changes in nerve responses, performance deficits on tests of cognitive function. At higher exposures there may be kidney effects, respiratory failure and death.

Quick facts:

- Mercury is also known as quicksilver because of its silvery color, and reflective metallic nature.
- Elemental mercury is a liquid at room temperature.

- It is the "invisible" vapors of mercury that are the true hazard.
- Just playing with mercury one time can contaminate the body, clothes, and property to the point they cannot be decontaminated.
- Mercury poisoning in children at high levels can have permanent effects.
- A teaspoon of mercury not cleaned up properly can contaminate a house so that it is no longer inhabitable.
- Once mercury hits the ground it breaks up into microscopic beads that you may not even see.
- Vacuuming or sweeping a mercury spill can create approximately 10 times more hazardous mercury vapors than cleaning it properly.

MEDIA RESOURCES

Don't Mess With Mercury Video/PSA – Embed Code:

<http://www.epa.gov/region09/toxic/dontmesswithmercury/dontmess-embed.html>



YouTube Link: <http://bit.ly/No3Eu>

Spanish: <http://bit.ly/ABYhd>



Flickr Link (images of emergency response to mercury spills): <http://bit.ly/7nK8a>



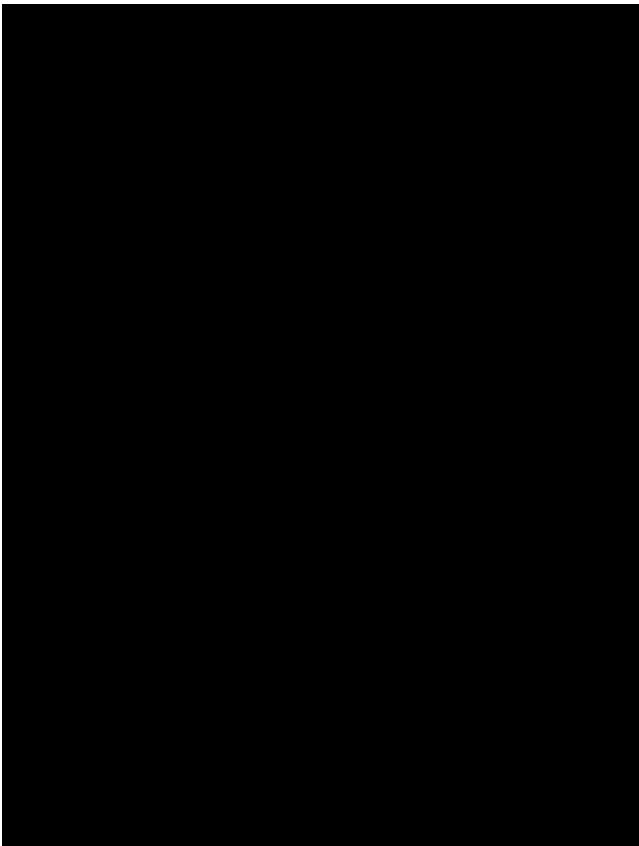
EPA Greenversations Blog: <http://bit.ly/q08v2>

For more information: <http://www.dontmesswithmercury.org/>

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