

Mercury in Your Home

Mercury is used in a wide variety of household products, including paint, thermometers, thermostats, batteries, fluorescent lamps, disinfectants, antiseptics, diuretics and preservatives. These items release mercury into the environment and home when broken, mishandled or disposed. Proper care is important when dealing with mercury-containing products. If spilled, mercury absorbs into many household materials while slowly evaporating into the air over time, allowing for exposure. Knowing what products and items contain mercury and handling them properly will limit the risk of mercury exposure. Common products often have a simple and environmentally friendly alternative. Some examples are listed below:

Thermometers - Mercury is used in thermometers because it expands and contracts evenly with temperature changes. Existing mercury-containing thermometers are safely recycled at the nearest recycling facility. Check with your local solid waste management district for local options. Alternatives include the electronic (digital) or red alcohol thermometers.



Household switches (Thermostats) - Mercury conducts electricity and is used in many household and appliance switches. They are used in temperature-sensitive and mechanical (tilt) switches. Many of these switches are inside the appliance. Examples of appliances that have mercury switches include thermostats, clothing irons and top loading freezers and washing machines. Some products, like thermostats are recycled through local recycling companies and new equipment vendors. Mechanical and electronic switches are available in mercury-free versions.

Household Lamps - Fluorescent, high intensity discharge (HID) and neon lamps contain mercury, often in vapor form. Mercury is released when bulbs are broken or incinerated. Fluorescent lamps are good energy savers, using up to 50 percent less electricity than incandescent lights. This energy savings reduces mercury emissions from power plants. Alternatives are labeled as low mercury lamps and often can be recognized by their green endcaps.



Batteries - Before 1980, most batteries used in homes contained mercury. Current mercury batteries are “button” shaped and are used in hearing aids, watches and other items requiring a small battery. In the last decade the United States battery industry achieved a 99 percent reduction in mercury by using alternative materials. Silver oxide, zinc-air, and alkaline batteries are the best alternatives for replacing batteries produced before 1994.

Paints - Latex paint produced before 1992 had large amounts of mercury to prevent fungus growth. Mercury vapors were released when paint was applied. Use latex paint manufactured after 1992.

Old Chemistry Sets and Toys - Children's chemistry sets were once sold with liquid mercury. Some toys contain a drop of mercury that is moved through a maze, called a mercury maze. Check chemistry sets and toys to be sure they are mercury-free.

Lighted Athletic Shoes - Some athletic shoes with flashing lights in the soles contain mercury. Some states have banned the sale of these shoes. Newer shoes are mercury-free.

Pesticides - Fungicides and biocides produced before 1994 used mercury toxins to kill fungus, weeds and other pests. Most new pesticides are mercury-free.

Clothing Irons - Some irons have an automatic shut-off switch containing mercury. Irons with mercury-free automatic shut-off switches are available.

Antiseptics - Mercurochrome is a skin antiseptic used to treat cuts and abrasions. It is not commonly used. Mercury-free alternatives include Neosporin and Mycin. Thimerosal is used in antiseptic creams and as preservatives in pharmaceutical solutions including contact lens solutions. Mercury-free products are substituted, when available. Talk to your pharmacist about alternatives.



Blood Pressure Gauges - Home blood pressure gauges contain almost 1.5 pounds of mercury. An aneroid blood-pressure unit is a mercury-free option.



Barometers - A barometer is an instrument used to measure pressure in the atmosphere that contains liquid mercury. A Bourdon tube gauge is an alternative to mercury-containing barometers.

Microwave Ovens - Mercury vapor bulbs were used in older microwave ovens. However, new models do not contain mercury.

Information provided by: Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.state.oh.us