

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH BRANCH

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Mercury at work: Old and new hazards

Metallic mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can cause health damage—including neurological and reproductive harm—in very small amounts. Workers can be exposed to mercury if they breathe mercury vapor or get it on their skin. The hazards of mercury have been known for many years.

But as mercury is phased out of some products and processes, new uses and potential exposures have emerged. Fluorescent tubes and compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) contain mercury vapor; when the bulbs are broken and crushed, mercury is released into the air. Mercury-containing instruments or equipment are still used in laboratories, water treatment plants, and health care settings. Mercury can be present in other devices and processes we do not usually think of as "using mercury", such as thermostat switches. These devices can break and release mercury-containing dust, liquid, or vapor.

OHB's Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service or HESIS has an updated fact sheet on metallic mercury that addresses these emerging concerns. The fact sheet describes potentially serious health damage that can result from mercury exposure and offers tips on working safely around mercury, as well as cleaning up a spill. It also features resources for controlling mercury in the workplace.

HESIS identifies and evaluates new and unappreciated workplace chemical hazards, figures out what people in real work situations need to know, and provides practical information on chemical hazards.

Resources

Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service

Mercury in the Workplace fact sheet

Protecting Workers from Mercury while Crushing and Recycling Fluorescent Light Bulbs - OSHA fact sheet

Email Occupational Health Watch (OHW@cdph.ca.gov) with feedback or change of address.

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