

MERCURY CLEANUP PROTOCOL:

What should you do if a fluorescent bulb breaks in your home or workplace?

This protocol was compiled by SafeMinds from three of the leading informational sources on mercury exposure and cleanup as of August 2008. These sources are the State of Maine Department of Environmental Protection the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Health Care Without Harm/Europe.

Because the effects of mercury exposure are not yet fully understood, the cleanup guidelines offered are the most stringent and intentionally err on the side of caution. Research is ongoing, and guidelines will continue to change as additional data becomes available. While current at the time of publication, these recommendations should be considered informational and not necessarily the final word on mercury cleanup.

This protocol only addresses small mercury cleanups. In the event of a larger exposure, such as breakage of a whole box of fluorescent bulbs, we recommend shutting the door, turning off any internal ventilation, opening any exterior doors and windows and contacting your local health authorities.

Guidelines for a Small Mercury Cleanup

STEP 1: EVACUATE AND ISOLATE

- Remove all people and pets from the affected area
- Do not let anyone walk through the breakage area on the way out
- Close any interior doors and turn off any internal ventilation systems/close vents
- Open exterior doors and windows
- **Stay out of the area for at least 15 minutes before continuing with clean up**

STEP 2: PROTECT YOURSELF

- Remove all jewelry from your hands and wrists as the mercury may amalgamate with the metal if it contacts it
- Change into old clothes and shoes that can be discarded if they become contaminated
- Put on rubber or latex gloves
- Wear a protective facemask if you have one

**Don't
trash
me.**



**Recycle
fluorescents
and cleanup
mercury spills
properly.**



STEP 3A: TO CLEAN A HARD SURFACE

- Use a stiff card (like an index card) to remove any glass fragments and powder residue or visible beads of mercury
- Place them in a glass jar with a metal screw-on lid. If necessary, empty a food jar into another container to make it available for use. A joint compound bucket with a push-on lid is also a reasonably tight container. If a glass jar or compound bucket is not available, you may use two layers of sealed plastic bags, but be aware that these will not adequately contain the mercury vapors and should be removed from the building for recycling as soon as possible.
- Use sticky tape to pick up any remaining small glass fragments or powder
- Wipe the area clean with damp paper towels or wet wipes

STEP 3B: TO CLEAN A CARPET OR RUG

- Carefully, pick up the glass fragments and place them in a glass jar with a metal screw-on lid. If necessary, empty a food jar into another container to make it available for use. A joint compound bucket with a push-on lid is also a reasonably tight container. If a glass jar or compound bucket is not available, you may use two layers of sealed plastic bags, but be aware that these will not adequately contain the mercury vapors and should be removed from the building for special recycling as soon as possible.
- Use sticky tape to pick up any remaining small glass fragments or powder
- You can also use tweezers, an eyedropper or a syringe (without a needle) to remove any small debris, but the tools must be discarded with the breakage materials, as they will be contaminated
- Since breakage on soft surfaces is difficult to clean thoroughly, the safest choice is to remove the section of carpet or discard the rug. **This is essential if there is a young child or pregnant woman who may use the space.**
- Please note that the current EPA cleanup protocol allows the option of retaining the carpet or rug. Based on data from the Maine DEP study, SafeMinds does not believe that a homeowner can adequately clean carpets or rugs contaminated with mercury and recommends removing them from the site.

STEP 3C: TO CLEAN CLOTHING, BEDDING OR OTHER SOFT MATERIALS

- It is nearly impossible to clean clothing, bedding, or upholstery that has come in contact with mercury – these items should be discarded
- Do not try to wash these items as this may contaminate your washing machine and pollute sewage
- If these items have only come in contact with mercury vapor (for example, the clothes that you wore to clean up), these items **should** be washed – as long as they did not contact any of the debris. (Please note that this recommendation by the EPA is going to be further investigated in their follow up to the Maine DEP study.)

STEP 4: FINAL DISPOSAL AND FOLLOW UP

- Ensure that all cleanup materials including your gloves are sealed in the jar or bags. Label the container/s as “Universal Waste – Broken Lamp – Contains Mercury”
- If you think your shoes may have contacted the debris during clean up, they should be discarded with the debris. If you are sure that they have not directly contacted the mercury, wipe them with a wet wipe or damp paper towel and dispose of the towels or wipes along with the other contaminated debris.
- Wash your hands and face
- Keep the area ventilated to the outdoors for at least 24 hours after clean up is complete
- Recycle the waste properly – not in your household trash
- Do not allow the waste to be stored in your home. Recycle it promptly, particularly if you used plastic bags for containment.

Six Things You Should Never Do With Mercury:

1. Never use a vacuum cleaner to clean up a mercury spill. It will vaporize the mercury and spread it around your home. The vacuum cleaner will be contaminated and may need to be discarded.
2. Never use a broom to clean up a mercury spill. It breaks up the mercury and moves it around. You will also need to discard the broom.
3. Never wash mercury down the drain. It can lodge in your plumbing and contaminate septic tanks and the sludge in sewage treatment plants.
4. Never continue to wear footwear or clothing that has had direct contact with mercury. This increases your exposure and spreads the contamination.
5. Never burn or incinerate anything contaminated with mercury. This puts the mercury into the atmosphere.
6. Never use household cleaning products to clean a mercury spill, particularly products containing ammonia or chlorine. These chemicals will react violently with mercury, releasing a toxic gas.