

We've come a long way in our knowledge about the hazards of mercury. Not too long ago schoolchildren examined balls of it with their bare hands. Now we know that mercury is a powerful neurotoxin, which at high levels can result in lowered IQ, impaired memory and vision, and attention deficit disorders. Michigan schools have banned mercury use in experiments, and are phasing out mercury-containing products such as light switches and thermometers.

Despite the progress, a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control found that 6% of American women of childbearing age have unsafe mercury levels in their bloodstream, which is of great concern because mercury can damage the developing brains of unborn fetuses.

The main way we get mercury in our bodies is by eating fish. Currently forty states have fish advisories because of mercury. Fish from all of Michigan's inland lakes are under a mercury advisory (see "Michigan Fish Advisory" at www.michigan.gov).

Seafood and shellfish are also sources of mercury, with common favorites being among the most contaminated, such as tuna (especially white albacore) and swordfish. Even "organic" fish can be high in mercury, because legally, any wild-caught fish can be labeled organic.

Mercury gets into the aquatic foodchain via precipitation from mercury-polluted air. Emissions from coal-fired power plants are the number one source of mercury pollution in the U.S. In fact, Michigan has the second-worst mercury hot-spot in the country—Governor Granholm made a campaign pledge to reduce mercury emissions from our power plants by 90 percent.

Another source of mercury pollution is incineration of trash that contains mercury. Mercury is still in many of the products we use, such as thermometers, thermostats, barometers, electrical switches, and even in children's "light-up" athletic sneakers. Safe alternatives exist for many products—for more on this, search for "alternatives to mercury" at www.michigan.gov/deq.

When it is time to get rid of your mercury-containing products, please bring them to the Washtenaw County Household Hazardous Waste Collection Site, at 705 Zeeb Rd., open Saturday mornings from 9 a.m. to noon. Proper disposal is essential to allow the mercury to be recovered, instead of incinerated or landfilled. For instance, never put fluorescent light bulbs in the regular trash, because the powder inside the bulbs contains mercury (but do buy fluorescents, as they save lots of energy, which means less mercury emissions from power plants!).

Should you have a mercury spill, e.g. if a thermometer breaks, do not sweep or vacuum it. Instead, collect the mercury with an eye dropper or roll it onto an index card while wearing rubber gloves. Place the mercury, and anything that may have touched it, in a plastic container within a zip-locked bag. Ventilate the area, and reduce heat to 65 degrees. Call (734) 222-3950 to arrange an appointment for drop-off at the HHW Collection Site. More details on proper disposal are available at www.ewashtenaw.org (search "mercury").

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