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What is Mercury?

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Mercury is a liquid metal commonly found in thermometers. However, as we've learned from the Hosea Elementary School spill, mercury left in the open air can be hazardous to your health. Health concerns related to contact with mercury are fairly new...many people can even remember playing with the quicksilver as a kid. But now, health officials warn against too much contact. KQ2's Maggie Crane talks to chemistry and health officials about precautions you should take when dealing with mercury.

Dr. Len Archer at Missouri Western uses mercury everyday in his chemistry labs, even though it can cause serious health problems. "It can cause senility, loss of memory, loss of muscular control...you'll have twitching, nervousness," Dr. Archer says.

It's clearly a dangerous liquid, but only in large quantities and over long periods of time. "You break a thermometer, it's a minute amount, it's something you should wash up, you should clean up as soon as possible, but it's not something you should panic over," Carl Sparks, Environmental Specialist, says.

What does cause panic is when the liquid vaporizes. "When it becomes real dangerous is when it's absorbed, and that means it has to vaporize, and the absorption is through inhalation," Wally Patrick of Heartland Regional Medical Center says.

Mercury vaporizes when it is heated. If you have a mercury spill, ways to properly contain the problem have been established. "You should not vacuum it with a regular vacuum cleaner, because all you're doing is

"The first thing they should do is carefully, and not touch it, a piece of paper, cardboard, something that they can get the majority of the liquid product up and put it in some kind of a plastic container, like a trash bag, zip lock bag, something to contain it so it doesn't spread around the house," Sparks says.

If you have old mercury thermometers in your home, you can bring them to the health department for safe disposal.

"They should wrap it newspapers or some kind of packing so there's not a chance of it breaking with them bringing it to us," Sparks says.

And as an extra precaution, that also goes for medical thermometers.

"If you have a really old mercury thermometer and want to check it and get a new one, or even one of the electronic ones, so there's not even a chance for exposure there," Patrick says.

The bottom line is it's better to be safe than sorry.

Another source of mercury you might not think about is in our mouth. Patrick says people with mercury-blended tooth fillings can be at risk. The fillings slowly break down and release mercury into the body. Although not everyone has side effects from mercury fillings, anyone who has old metal fillings and suffer allergies or dizziness, you should see a dentist.

If you come in contact with mercury, the Encyclopedia of Chemicals says that occasional, incidental swallowing of metallic mercury is harmless. For example, if a mercury-filled thermometer was to break in your mouth while taking your temperature, swallowing a little mercury would not cause concernable damage.

If mercury gets on your skin, the best thing to do is to wash your hands with soap and

water as soon as possible.

"Try not to touch your eyes, your mouth, until you have your hands and anything it touched well decontaminated," Patrick adds.
Patrick also says you should get into a well-ventilated area if mercury spills.



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