

MERCURY

Mercury is a heavy, silvery, odorless liquid. Mercury can evaporate into the air at normal temperatures. If heated, such as by a welding or cutting torch, it evaporates much more quickly. Mercury vapor in the air is colorless and odorless—but very toxic.

Mercury can also enter your body by being absorbed through your skin.

What can mercury do to a person?

A sudden high exposure to mercury vapor inhaled into the lung causes headaches, cough, chest pain, and difficulty breathing. It may also cause soreness of the mouth, loss of teeth, nausea, and diarrhea. It may lead to permanent lung scarring. A very high exposure to mercury can damage your kidneys.

Long-term exposure to mercury can cause effects which develop gradually. It may cause shaking of the hands, eyelids, lips, tongue, or jaw. It may cause headaches, trouble sleeping, personality change, memory loss, irritability, indecisiveness and loss of intelligence. It can also cause skin rash, sores in the mouth, or sore and swollen gums. Many of these symptoms go away when the exposure to mercury stops. Your body gets rid of mercury through urine.

Mercury poisoning can be treated with a medicine that pulls mercury out of your body and into the urine. This medicine is only used if mercury exposure is recent—not if mercury exposure occurred many years ago. When the effects of mercury last for years after exposure stops, that injury is usually permanent.

What can the medical exam and tests look for?

If your work history shows you were likely exposed to a lot of mercury, you will be offered a medical exam. Depending on what the exam finds, you may be offered additional tests to look for possible long-term effects. Since mercury mainly affects the brain and nervous system, the exam and the tests will look for effects there.

During your medical exam, we will look carefully for signs of damage from mercury, and ask you questions about these effects. If the doctor sees any signs, or hears from you about symptoms of mercury damage, he or she will order additional tests. If your medical exam shows that you have a tremor or loss of feeling in your feet or hands, the doctor will likely arrange for tests called nerve conduction studies and electromyography. If the exam shows that you may have been affected by personality change, irritability or memory loss, the doctor will likely arrange neuropsychological tests. These tests include pencil and paper tests of memory, understanding of written materials, and some coordination tests using blocks or pegs.

After your exam and tests, you will receive a letter summarizing what the doctor found, and copies of your test results. If the exam or tests find something important, the letter will urge you to follow up with your own doctor or with a specialist.