

ELEMENTAL MERCURY: FAQs

1. What is elemental mercury?

It is a silver colored substance also known as “Quick silver” that exists as a dense liquid at room temperature. Elemental mercury can also take the state of a solid or gas. Elemental mercury is odorless and evaporates slowly at room temperature into the atmosphere. Loose elemental mercury is typically found stored in a glass jar in a garage, basement, attic, or other storage space. Mercury is represented as “Hg” on the periodic table of elements.

2. What is the history of mercury?

Mercury is a naturally occurring element found in the environment. It was regularly mined after the discovery of its presence in cinnabar ore. Mercury was used to increase the efficiency of gold mining by attaching to the gold dust being flushed out of mines. This gold-mercury mixture separated the elements from gravel and sediments. Due to their constant exposure to the toxin, miners were often poisoned.

3. What are the hazards of elemental mercury?

Mercury can damage the central nervous system, skin, kidneys, and liver. Nerve damage usually starts with the loss of sensitivity in hands and feet and difficulty in walking or slurred speech. The risk will vary depending on how much mercury the person is exposed to.

4. What is “Mad Hatter” and it’s association with mercury?

Mercury was used in another form—mercurous nitrate—in hat making. In order to create felt used for hats, rabbit fur underwent a chemical process that turned the fur into felt, and the mercurous nitrate into elemental mercury. In 1941, the U.S. Public Health Service banned the use of mercury in hat making because the “Mad Hatters” suffered tremors, memory loss and personality changes as well as other symptoms due to their long-term exposure.

5. What is the Massachusetts General Law for mercury?

“A solid waste collector shall refuse to collect the contents of a solid waste container that the collector knows or reasonable should know contains 1 or more mercury-added products unless such solid waste is collected for the purpose of being reused, recycled or properly disposed of as hazardous waste or otherwise managed to ensure that the mercury does not become mixed with other solid waste or wastewater”. Part I Title II Chapter 21 H Section 6L

6. Is elemental mercury worthless?

Yes, mercury no longer has a value for resale. Decades ago mercury was collected and sold similar to scrap copper and brass. Because of its toxicity, commercial export of mercury from the U.S. to other countries is banned. The domestic market for mercury is saturated and hazardous waste collectors now have to pay a premium to store and dispose of elemental mercury.

7. Who picks up elemental mercury?

A local hazardous waste vendor called the CRS (Complete Recycling Solutions) will work with Barnstable County to make an appointment to come to your location at no cost to you. FREE!

8. Will I get in trouble for having elemental mercury?

No, it is not illegal to have elemental mercury. However, even a small spill will contaminate your home and costs thousands to clean up. Our mission is to make sure every drop of elemental mercury is picked up on Cape Cod at no charge to you.

9. What happens to the mercury once it is collected by the hazardous vendors?

The elemental mercury is brought back to a state licensed sorting and separation facility where it is collected and placed in hazardous waste storage.

10. Where is mercury used now?

The use of mercury in new products is strictly limited. Mercury is occasionally used in devices today because of its excellent conductivity and high surface tension. In fluorescent lighting, for example, electricity passed through mercury vapor, which causes phosphor in the tube to fluoresce, making visible light. People are not exposed to mercury because it is contained in a protective bulb. The danger comes if large quantities of bulbs break releasing mercury vapor - often due to accidents when handling or improper disposal.

11. If I threw a container of elemental mercury in my trash what would happen?

Half of our trash is shipped to Rochester, MA where it is incinerated to make energy. The other half is landfilled in Bourne and other landfills off Cape. Mercury disposed of in trash will vaporize and return to Earth when it rains, polluting waters across our region and the world.

12. Who do I call if I have elemental mercury?

Mike Maguire – Barnstable County Hazardous Material Environmental Specialist

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Covanta SEMASS and Barnstable County will work together to send out a hazardous waste vendor to your location or you can come to your town’s Household Hazardous Products Collection for disposal. Check out our **WANTED: Mercury Bookmark** and our **Household Hazardous Waste Collection** webpage!



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IT'S A CAPE COD THING.**