



Mercury

Mercury is a naturally occurring metal found in air, water, and soil. It exists in several forms, including elemental (or metallic) mercury, inorganic mercury compounds, and organic mercury compounds:

- **Elemental mercury** is liquid at room temperature and is used in thermometers, fluorescent light bulbs, some electrical switches, and some industrial processes.
- **Inorganic mercury** compounds are formed when mercury combines with other elements to form salts, which are usually powders or crystals. Inorganic mercury compounds are found naturally in the environment. Some forms of inorganic mercury have been used in antiseptic creams, ointments, and preservatives.
- **Organic mercury** compounds are formed when mercury combines with carbon. Microscopic organisms can produce organic mercury compounds (methylmercury) in contaminated water and soil, which can accumulate in the food chain. Other special types of organomercurials have been used as medical preservatives and medicines.

How People Are Exposed to Mercury

- Eating fish or shellfish that is contaminated with methylmercury, which is the main source of general human exposures to mercury;
- Breathing air contaminated with elemental mercury vapors (e.g., in workplaces such as dental offices and industries that use mercury or in locations where a mercury spill or release has occurred);
- Having dental fillings that contain mercury; and
- Practicing cultural or religious rituals that use mercury.

How Mercury Affects People's Health

- Short-term exposure to extremely high levels of elemental mercury vapors can result in lung damage, nausea, diarrhea, increases in blood pressure or heart rate, skin rashes, eye irritation, and injury to the nervous system.
- Prolonged exposure to lower levels of elemental mercury can permanently damage the brain and kidneys.
- The developing brain of a fetus can be injured if the mother is exposed to methylmercury.

Levels of Mercury in U.S. Population

Scientists tested levels of mercury in the blood of 16,780 participants who took part in CDC's national study known as the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). These findings are based on total blood mercury levels in the U.S. general

population for persons aged 1 year and older who participated in NHANES during 2003-2006, as well as trends in the total mercury of children aged 1-5 and females aged 16-49 during 1999-2006.

- In the total population during 2003-2006, the total blood mercury levels for non-Hispanic blacks and non-Hispanic whites were higher than those for Mexican Americans.
- Across the age groups in the total population during 2003-2006, total blood mercury levels increased with age, peaked at the fifth or sixth decade, depending on race/ethnicity, and then declined.
- In the most recent survey period of 2005-2006, the 95th percentile levels for total blood mercury in children aged 1-5 years and females aged 16-49 years were 1.43 µg/L and 4.48 µg/L, respectively. The 95th percentile means that 95 percent of the U.S. population's exposure is below this estimated level. Conversely, only 5 percent of the population will have values at this level or higher.
- Over the four survey periods from 1999-2006, blood mercury levels increased slightly for non-Hispanic white children and decreased slightly for non-Hispanic black and Mexican American children. Female children had slightly higher blood mercury levels than male children.

For More Information

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Detailed information about mercury and public health is available at <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/alerts/970626.html> and <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/cabs/mercury/index.html>
- CDC Emergency Preparedness and Response
Case definitions of mercury, toxicology FAQs, and toxicological profile at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/mercury/>

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