

13. Mercury Spills and Disposal Policy

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES/PROCEDURES

TITLE: MERCURY SPILLS AND DISPOSAL POLICY

SUBMITTED/REVIEWED BY: EH&S Specialist
Environmental Health & Safety Department

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Policy Statement

This policy is written to describe methods for handling spills or leaks of mercury and proper disposal of mercury or equipment/supplies containing mercury at [redacted]. This policy includes the minimum requirements outlined in the [redacted] Health System Core Policy on Mercury Spills.

Procedure

A. Actions to take in the event of a mercury spill or leak.

1. Any individual who becomes aware of a spill or leak involving mercury will promptly report the incident to Security Communications at 2-0911.
2. If the incident involves breakage of a single mercury patient thermometer, personnel from the Housekeeping department will be contacted by Security to clean up and dispose of the broken thermometer.
3. If the incident involves any other type of mercury spill, Security personnel will respond and establish a perimeter by removing personnel from the area and preventing re-entry into the contaminated area. The initial perimeter is approximately 10 feet or one single enclosed room.
4. Staff and patients should be re-located to another area, if possible, to prevent an over exposure to mercury and minimize potential contamination.
5. Security Communications personnel may call the [redacted] Environmental Safety staff for additional guidance. Security Communications personnel will contact [redacted] Hazardous Materials Response Team to request clean up of the spill.
6. Security personnel will write a Security Report for each mercury incident. Security personnel may allow re-entry to the spill site when it has been released for occupancy by the [redacted] Environmental Safety staff or by the [redacted] Hazardous Materials Response Team.

B. Disposal of equipment/supplies containing mercury.

1. Contact the [redacted] Environmental Safety staff at [redacted] to obtain proper disposal method of any equipment/supplies containing mercury. Mercury is considered a hazardous material and should not be discarded in the regular trash.

**BARNES-JEWISH HOSPITAL
MERCURY FACT SHEET**

WHAT IS MERCURY?

Mercury is a chemical that occurs naturally in the environment in several forms. Elemental mercury and mercury compounds have been used in hospitals for a long time. Common sources of mercury within a hospital include thermometers, sphygmomanometers, esophageal dilators and dental amalgam.

WHO PROVIDES GUIDELINES ON MERCURY?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) lists mercury as a hazardous chemical and has established permissible exposure levels to which staff can be exposed without incurring any acute or chronic health problems. The limit for exposure is currently set at .05 mg/m³ for mercury vapor. Spillage involving sphygmomanometers will usually result in levels in the room exceeding the .05 permissible exposure level.

HOW MIGHT I BE EXPOSED TO MERCURY?

Common exposures, which occur at hospitals, include broken thermometers or broken sphygmomanometers. Mercury can easily enter the body through inhalation and absorption through the skin. Once mercury has entered the body, it is expelled mainly through urine and feces. The primary concern is for employees who are repeatedly exposed to mercury. Most hospital staff do not have that kind of exposure.

HOW CAN MERCURY AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Exposures obtained in a hospital setting are normally short term exposures, which may affect the brain or kidney. Full recovery is likely to occur once the body cleans itself of the contamination. Long-term exposure to mercury can permanently damage the brain and kidneys.

ISN'T THERE SOME PROBLEM WITH JEWELRY AND MERCURY?

Yes, direct exposure to mercury, or even vapor levels which are high, will turn gold jewelry white. A buffing process can restore some jewelry but exposures can be irreversible.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AGAINST OVEREXPOSURE TO MERCURY?

Generally, the spill of mercury when it involves a thermometer is not a health risk, but it does need to be properly cleaned up by Housekeeping Staff. Spills involving sphygmomanometers often result in overexposure to employees, patients and visitors if they stay in the spill environment. If at all possible, remove everyone from the room affected and relocate the patient to minimize mercury vapor exposure. Do not try to wipe up the mercury with towels or linen. Close the door and contact Security at