THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

Frequently Asked Questions on Mercury for Health Care Workers

1. What is Mercury?

Mercury is a toxic metal found in some medical and laboratory equipment and products. When it is released into the environment or spilt indoors, it can form an invisible vapour that people may inhale, potentially harming their health.

2. What are the common sources of Mercury in healthcare facilities?

- Mercury thermometers
- Blood pressure machines (sphygmomanometers)
- Laboratory equipment
- Dental fillings (amalgam)
- Fluorescent bulbs and tubes
- Batteries and electrical switches

3. What are the health effects of mercury exposure?

- Short-term exposure to mercury may cause headaches, coughing, eye irritation, chest discomfort, nausea, and difficulty breathing.
- Long-term exposure can affect the brain and nervous system, leading to shaking (tremors), memory problems, and other nerve-related conditions. It can also cause kidney damage and affect the growth and development of children.

4. Who is most at risk of mercury exposure in the healthcare facility?

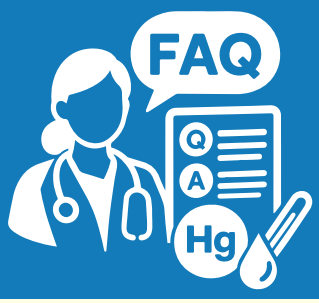
- Nurses and clinicians who use mercury-containing equipment
- Cleaners and waste handlers
- Dental practitioners
- Laboratory staff
- Pregnant women
- Infants and children

5. How can people be exposed to mercury?

Most people are exposed to mercury by breathing in mercury vapour or by touching surfaces and environments contaminated with mercury.

6. How can a mercury spill occur?

Mercury spills can occur when equipment containing mercury is broken, damaged, or improperly handled during use, maintenance, transport, or disposal.





7. What are the dos and don'ts in the event of a mercury spill?

DO:

- ✓ Isolate the affected area and keep people away from the spill.
- ✓ Open windows manually to improve ventilation and visibility.
- ✓ Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) before cleaning the spill.
- ✓ Use a mercury spill kit.
- ✓ Report the incident according to facility procedures and Healthcare waste management guidelines.
- ✓ Mercury spill clean-up should be done by two trained staff working in pairs (one cleaning and another monitoring).
- ✓ Carefully collect the mercury spill using cardboard, a syringe, sticky tape, or materials from the spill kit.
- ✓ Keep the mercury spill in a container clearly labelled "MERCURY WASTE".
- ✓ Store the spilt mercury in sealed, rigid and clearly labelled containers
- ✓ Store the spilt mercury safely in a designated temporary storage area.
- ✓ Inform the exposed staff about the danger of mercury exposure and implement the medical guidelines and SoPs.

DON'T:

- ✗ Sweep mercury with a broom
- ✗ Use a vacuum cleaner
- ✗ Touch mercury with bare hands
- ✗ Burn mercury waste
- ✗ Throw mercury waste into ordinary trash bins
- ✗ Do not pour mercury into drains or sinks.
- ✗ Assign pregnant or breastfeeding staff to mercury spill response duties.
- ✗ Use sodium hypochlorite (bleach or chlorine) cleaners near mercury, as this can form mercuric chloride, which is toxic.
- ✗ Use mechanized/central ventilation (HVAC) during a spill, as this can spread mercury vapour to other rooms.

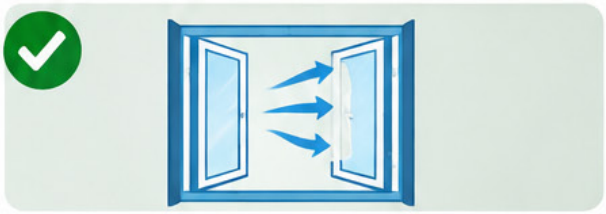
8. How do you safely store mercury waste?

- Keep mercury waste in clearly labelled, airtight containers
- Store the waste away from heat and direct sunlight
- Use designated and labelled hazardous waste storage areas
- Ensure the waste is handled and disposed of through licensed hazardous waste handlers.



DO's











DON'Ts













9. How can healthcare facilities prevent and control mercury hazards?

Healthcare facilities should:

- Replace mercury-containing equipment with mercury-free alternatives
- Regularly train staff on mercury safety and run awareness campaigns.
- Keep mercury spill kits available in all departments where mercury-containing products are used and record the locations.
- Conduct routine inspections and safety checks
- Implement mercury management Standard Operating Procedures.
- Promote proper segregation of waste

Take Away Messages:

1. Mercury-containing medical devices such as Mercury thermometers and Blood pressure machines (sphygmomanometers) are a danger to public health
2. Health facilities should progressively replace mercury-containing medical devices with safe, effective mercury-free alternatives

For more information on preventing mercury poisoning in the community, please contact:

Ministry of Health: **0800-100-066 (SMS Alert: 6767), @MinofHealthUG**	National Environment Management Authority (NEMA): **+256 414-251-064, 0800-144-444 (Toll Free), info@nema.go.ug, @nemaug**

UN environment programme

NEMA National Environment Management Authority ENSURING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

gef

World Health Organization Uganda