

# *Austin guide to...* **MERCURY SPILLS**



## **Do You Have Mercury in Your Home?**

Elemental Mercury is a shiny, silver-colored metal. Mercury persists in the environment and does not degrade. It is used in items like fever thermometers, barometers, CFL and fluorescent light bulbs, batteries, and thermostats. Although its use in these items continues to decline, old devices can be found and used. Broken devices can leak or spill mercury, contaminating surfaces and exposing people.

Mercury is very toxic and must be handled with extreme care. Mercury droplets can vaporize into the air at room temperature. Once airborne, people can breathe in mercury vapor. Because droplets are easily spread on surfaces and can seep into cracks, it is very difficult to clean up. Specific containment and clean-up procedures should be used to avoid exposure. The best way to prevent mercury spills from happening is through proper storing, handling, and disposing of mercury-containing items. Unbroken items can be disposed of at the City of Austin Recycle and Reuse Center.

## After a Mercury Spill

- Immediately remove pets, children, and adults from area and don't let anyone walk through spill
- Shut all doors to contaminated area
- Open exterior windows of contaminated area to ventilate
- Lower the temperature in the contaminated area if possible
- If the spill is similar to the amount in a fever thermometer, you may be able to conduct your own cleanup. Cleanup instructions can be found at: [www.epa.gov/mercury/what-do-if-mercury-thermometer-breaks](http://www.epa.gov/mercury/what-do-if-mercury-thermometer-breaks)
- Spills greater than the amount of a thermometer, call 911 to initiate a hazardous material response by the Austin Fire Department and notify the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department at (512) 972-5555. They will help you take initial steps for protection of health and safety, and help you determine if you need to hire a cleanup contractor specifically trained in mercury spill response.

- Consult your Poison Control Center and physician if you feel you have been exposed or have questions or concerns about your health.
- Notify the Watershed Protection Department if the spill may have migrated outside and for disposal guidance by calling (512) 974-2550.
- The National Response Center must be notified by calling (800) 424-8802 anytime 2 tablespoons or more of mercury is released.

## **What You Should Never Do**

- Never use a vacuum cleaner or broom to clean it up
- Never pour mercury down a drain
- Never wash clothing or other items that have come into direct contact with mercury
- Never walk around in contaminated shoes or clothing



# Who do I Contact?

**Austin Fire Department**  
9-1-1

To initiate a hazardous materials response, the Austin Fire Department recommends calling 9-1-1 immediately following a mercury spill inside or outside that is more than the amount in a fever thermometer.

**Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department**  
(512) 972-5555

The local health authority tracks hazardous materials exposures to the public. They also assess the potential exposure risk to public health, and provide information and guidance to the public and medical providers.

**National Response Center** (800) 424-8802

Any time one pound or more of mercury is released to the environment, it is mandatory to call the National Response Center (NRC). Note that because mercury is heavy, only two tablespoons of mercury weighs about one pound.

**Poison Control**  
(800) 222-1222

Poison control can be called for general guidance on mercury spills.

**Austin 24-Hour Pollution Hotline** (512) 974-2550

For mercury spills that may have migrated to waterways, storm sewers, or public property, contact the 24-Hour Pollution Hotline.

**Home Insurance Company**

Your home insurance company may be able to assist in remediating contaminated property.

**HazMat Contractor**

A hazardous materials remediation contractor may be necessary to conduct the cleanup. For a list of contractors that service the Austin area, call Austin's 24-Hour Pollution Hotline at (512) 974-2550.

**Austin Resource Recovery's Recycle & Reuse Drop-Off Center**  
(512) 974-4343

Call for disposal of unbroken items that may contain mercury such as thermometers, fluorescent lamps and button batteries.

