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EPA PROVIDES EXTENSIVE MERCURY SPILL PREVENTION AND CLEANUP INFORMATION

Environmental News

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With the recent metallic mercury contamination and emergency response action at a Washington, D.C. high school, EPA is reminding the public and school teachers – particularly science teachers and administrators – of the importance of secure storage, safe handling, and in the event of a spill, the safe cleanup of mercury. Parents and teachers should be aware of children's interest in mercury and can help inform them of its dangers. Mercury spills at schools can threaten students' health and, in some cases, lead to extended school closures.

If liquid mercury is spilled, it forms droplets that can accumulate in the tiniest of spaces and then emit vapors into the air. Mercury vapor in the air is odorless, colorless, and very toxic. Most mercury exposures occur by breathing vapors, by direct skin contact or by eating food or drinking water contaminated with mercury. Health problems caused by mercury depend on how much enters the body, how it entered, length of exposure, and individual responses to mercury exposure. Mercury is not to be handled, and all mercury spills, regardless of quantity, should be treated seriously.

EPA recommends that stored mercury should be securely locked and in a spill-proof, air-tight container. Schools and households should also consider removing mercury and replacing mercury-containing items such as thermometers, light fixtures or thermostats with mercury-free products. For more information on mercury health effects, safety and disposal, visit: <http://www.epa.gov/mercury> .

There are three different procedures to address mercury spills depending upon the amount spilled. Individuals can clean up spills less than or equal to the amount in a thermometer by following the steps outlined on EPA's Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/spills.htm#less> . If completing these steps is too difficult, contact a fire department or public health official. Even with very small amounts, it is important to isolate and ventilate the area. Children should leave the area.

For spills greater than the amount in a thermometer, the public is advised to follow these steps: isolate the area; turn down the temperature; open windows; don't let anyone walk through the mercury; don't vacuum; contact a fire department or public health official.

For spills greater than one pound (two tablespoons), it is mandatory to call the National Response Center at 800-424-8802.