

# Mercury:

## It's In Your Environment . . .

Oil refineries, incinerators, coal-fired power plants, and other industries release mercury into the environment. Mercury from broken fever thermometers, hospital waste and dental waste also pollutes the environment and contaminates waterways, soil, fish and other wildlife.

## It's In Your Food . . .

Pregnant women and women hoping to become pregnant should not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel or tilefish. These fish species contain enough mercury to increase the risk of nervous system damage in the unborn.

—Food and Drug Administration (FDA), January 2001

One in twelve women of childbearing age risk having children with impaired nervous systems due to mercury exposure in the womb.

—Centers for Disease Control (CDC), January 2003

In 2000, the National Academy of Science estimated that 60,000 babies are born each year at risk of nervous system defects and learning disabilities because their mothers ate contaminated fish while pregnant—an otherwise healthy food.



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## Your Environment



## Your Food

## Your Health



# It Affects Your Health . . .

## Thermometers

**M**ercury thermometers, found in many family medicine cabinets, are made of glass and contain a silvery-white liquid metal. If a mercury thermometer breaks, it can seriously threaten our environment and health.

For example, if the mercury from one fever thermometer finds its way into a waterway, **it is enough to contaminate all of the fish in an entire 20-acre lake.**

When the mercury found in fever thermometers is exposed to air, it forms a vapor that is easily inhaled.

Symptoms of acute exposure can include numbness around the mouth, tunnel vision, and tingling fingers and toes. Prolonged, high-level exposure can cause neurological and kidney damage, vision problems, and behavior abnormalities.

Usually, breaking one thermometer will not harm your health if the spill is properly cleaned. Remove contaminated carpeting, never use a vacuum, and never throw spilled mercury in the trash. Open windows to air out the area, and call the county health hazardous materials division for disposal and cleanup advice. **Exposures to mercury vapor from broken thermometers are preventable by using a safe alternative**, such as a solar, digital, dot matrix or gallium thermometer.



Thermometers are the single largest source of mercury in household waste.

## Contaminated Fish

**P**eople can unknowingly expose themselves to dangerous levels of mercury by eating fish—an otherwise healthy food.

All mercury, whether from industrial sources, medical and dental waste, or broken thermometers can enter our environment and migrate to rivers, lakes and the ocean. In water, it is converted to highly toxic methyl mercury and then absorbed by fish.

Data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, FDA and CDC suggest an alarming relationship between eating fish containing high amounts of methyl mercury and birth defects. **Pregnant women exposed to high levels of methyl mercury could have babies with vision problems, learning disabilities, or impaired nervous system development.**

Serious concern has been raised by consumer and public health groups regarding methyl mercury levels detected in tuna. Virtually every can of tuna is contaminated to some degree, and unsafe mercury levels have been reported in tuna steaks. Women of childbearing age and young children should strictly limit tuna consumption, particularly larger species such as ahi, bluefin, and albacore.



Toxic methyl mercury is stored in fish tissue and eaten by humans.

## How To Protect Yourself

According to the FDA and EPA, pregnant women and women who may become pregnant **should not eat:**

swordfish      tilefish  
shark          king mackerel

There is also concern about high levels of mercury detected in other kinds of fish. Larger fish species such as tuna steaks, marlin, and sea bass contain higher levels of mercury than smaller fish. Consumption of large fish species should be strictly limited during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. Children should also limit their consumption of bigger fish. Smaller fish and seafood that are safer to consume include salmon, tilapia, haddock, and shrimp.

It is also very important not to use mercury thermometers. Mercury thermometers can pose an immediate health threat if they break, and can also pollute waterways and fish if they are thrown away. Be sure to replace all mercury thermometers in your home with safe alternatives.

**Never throw them away.** Bring mercury thermometers to a household hazardous waste facility or roundup, or turn them in at a local exchange event for an alternative.

**Make sure you are taking care of your health and the health of your family—don't use mercury thermometers and pay attention to what kinds of fish are safer to eat.**