



STATE OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH, SAFETY AND TOXICOLOGY
243 Israel Road SE • PO Box 47825 • Olympia, Washington 98504-7825
TDD Relay Service: 1-800-833-6388

May 7, 2014

TO: School Administrators and Chemical Hygiene Officers

FROM: Nancy Bernard, Program Manager, School Environmental Health and Safety,
Washington State Department of Health
Ellen Ebert, Science Director, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

RE: **Removing Mercury from Washington's schools - Complying with state law**

In January 2014, parents called the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency with concerns about elemental mercury being “played with in a school science experiment.” This resulted in a joint investigation by the Washington State Departments of Health and Ecology, the local public health agency, the Educational Service District, and the Northwest Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit. The incident was a demonstration where the teacher was in control of the mercury at all times and students did not play with it. Fortunately there was minimal exposure and no spill. However, because of this incident, a concern was raised whether any other schools in the state still have mercury or mercury compounds on site.

In 2003 the Washington State Legislature passed the Mercury Education and Reduction Act (MERA), Chapter 70.95 Revised Code of Washington, regulating sale, use, and disposal of mercury-containing products in our state. Mercury released from these products builds up in our environment, particularly in fish, or can have direct exposure to individuals through inhalation. MERA mandated labeling of mercury containing light bulbs, banned the sale of most mercury containing products, and states:

“A school may not purchase for use in a primary or secondary classroom bulk elemental mercury or chemical mercury compounds. By January 1, 2006, all primary and secondary schools in the state must remove and properly dispose of all bulk elemental mercury, chemical mercury, and bulk mercury compounds used as teaching aids in science classrooms, not including barometers.”

Please take this opportunity to check and see that all mercury and mercury compounds have been removed from your science laboratories. Also ensure that mercury-containing thermometers and other products have been replaced with safer products.

Disposal Options

All mercury waste must be disposed as hazardous waste, or preferably recycled, either via a hazardous waste hauler or a permitted county or city hazardous waste collection program. These programs/contractors will ensure the mercury is properly managed.

Avoid “donating” waste mercury compounds, thermometers or liquid mercury. There is a risk of it being mismanaged and the school may take on liability.

Your Educational Service District or local hazardous waste program may assist with recycling and disposal options. At this time there is a hazardous waste contractor with a state contract that can pick up mercury and other hazardous materials from your schools. To find the current state disposal vendor, visit <https://fortress.wa.gov/ga/apps/contracting/contracts/03505c.doc>

Liquid mercury will dissolve steel, aluminum and other metals so it must be stored in either plastic or glass containers. Put the mercury in a small, sealed container, and then put it in a second, larger sealed container. Hazardous waste recyclers/disposers may be able to provide proper storage containers for mercury until it can be shipped to a recycler.

If you have any questions please contact Nancy Bernard with the Washington State Department of Health, School Environmental Health and Safety Program, at (360) 236-3072 or Nancy.Bernard@doh.wa.gov.

For Further Information:

- Washington State [Department of Health: Mercury](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health: School and Mercury](#)
- [Washington State Department of Ecology Mercury Reduction in Washington](#)
- Mercury Education and Reduction Act, [Chapter 70.95M Revised Code of Washington](#)
- U. S. Environmental Protection Agency: [Mercury Releases and Spills](#)
- Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry (ATSDR): [Don't Mess with Mercury](#) – information for schools

Mercury Exposure – Schools and Children:

- [MMWR - Hazardous Chemical Incidents in Schools --- United States, 2002--2007](#)
- [MMWR - Mercury Exposure in a Residential Community -- Florida, 1994](#)
- [MMWR - Mercury Exposure --- Kentucky, 2004](#)
- [MMWR - Mercury Exposure in a High School Laboratory -- Connecticut](#)