

# Heavy Metals and Safer Child Care

*How to avoid lead and mercury indoors and out*



Heavy metals like lead and mercury can affect the developing brain, even at low levels. Both chemicals can build up in our bodies over time. Young children are most at risk because of their natural hand-to-mouth behavior, and their bodies absorb chemicals more easily. **No amount of lead exposure is safe at any age.** Low income and children of color are disproportionately harmed by lead.

Lead was banned from gasoline and paint in 1978, and has been the subject of many toy recalls and subsequent legislation. However, **lead is still found in many items we encounter daily.** Mercury is still found in everyday products like mercury thermometers and thermostats.

## What to Avoid:

**Lead:** Lead may be added to make a product weigh more and appear of higher quality, or as a color stabilizer. Chips from old leaded paint can contaminate surrounding areas. Ingestion of highly concentrated lead can lead to severe lead poisoning. Exposure lowers IQ, reduces learning abilities, and causes behavior problems.

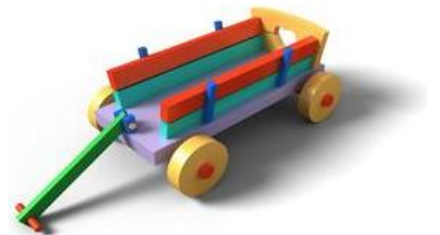
✓ **Spot it:** Inexpensive children's jewelry, soft vinyl toys, painted mugs and ceramics, old painted toys, artificial outdoor turf, water pipes or solder in older buildings

**Mercury:** Exposure to very high levels of metallic mercury vapor can cause brain, kidney, and lung damage. New York State prohibits the sale of mercury thermometers or thermostats. **It is illegal to dispose of mercury-containing thermometers as regular waste.**

✓ **Spot it:** Old thermostats, glass thermometers, compact fluorescent light bulbs (We still recommend the use of CFLs vs. incandescent for energy savings)

## What Can I Do?

- **Frequently wash hands, toys, and pacifiers.** Washing removes germs, along with dust and dirt that may contain lead. Wash hands before eating and after playing outside.
- **Choose lead-free jewelry.**
- **Look for lead-free or domestically produced ceramics** for children's food and drinks.
- **If you are remodeling** a home or facility built before 1978, make sure your contractor is certified as Lead-Safe. Do not do the work yourself.



### REMEMBER

Before or within three months of enrolling a child who is 1 - 6 years old, providers should ask for proof from the parent or guardian that the child has been tested for lead.



- **Use mats or rugs at all doorways**, and remove shoes when possible to avoid tracking in soil.
- **Wipe windowsills** to remove paint flakes and dust from areas within reach of children.
- **Flush your pipes before drinking**, and use only cold water for cooking and drinking to avoid possible lead.
- **Take used thermostats, mercury thermometers, fluorescent light bulbs**, and other mercury-containing products to a hazardous waste facility (details below).
- **Compact fluorescent light bulbs contain mercury. Do not put them in the regular trash**, even if they are still intact. Dispose of them as hazardous waste (details below).

## How to Clean a Mercury Spill

**Every child care facility should have a mercury spill kit.** Follow these instructions to clean up broken items, *even if you do not visibly see mercury*. Label your spill kit, and include: small bags, trash bags, gloves, paper towels, cardboard, an eyedropper, and tape. For any broken product containing mercury (thermometer, light bulb, etc):

- Remove children and pets from the room
- Air out the room for 5-10 minutes before cleaning
- Always wear gloves
- Collect debris in a rigid container lined with a bag and seal.  
**DO NOT use a vacuum cleaner**
- Air out room for 24-48 hours
- Call the DEC spill hotline with questions: 1-800-457-7362  
**You must report spills larger than 2 tablespoons to the DEC**

**If mercury beads are spilled:**  
**Use an eyedropper or cardboard to gather any beads, or pick up with tape**

**All debris and items used to clean a mercury spill (gloves, rags, etc) should be disposed of at a hazardous waste facility.**

## For More Information:

- Search product recalls: [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov)
- EPA Lead Education: [www.epa.gov/lead/pubs/leadpdf.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/lead/pubs/leadpdf.pdf)
- Healthy Stuff product database: [www.healthystuff.org/chemicals.lead.php](http://www.healthystuff.org/chemicals.lead.php)
- NYS Department of Health Guidelines: [www.health.ny.gov/publications/2517/](http://www.health.ny.gov/publications/2517/)
- Find mercury recycling facilities at: [search.earth911.com](http://search.earth911.com)
- Additional information from NYS: [www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/285.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/285.html)



Reviewed by

**CLEAN &  
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Supported by a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency  
Great Lakes Restoration Initiative



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