

Mercury

How You Can be Exposed

Mercury exists in three compounds: elemental mercury, inorganic mercury, and organic mercury. Each has its own unique properties and different exposure routes. Historically, mercury was used in many products including alkaline batteries, electronics, fungicides and pesticides, paints and pigments, and thermometers. Mercury is now being phased out of many production lines due to its toxicity.

- **Food** – people can be exposed to organic mercury from foods like fish and seafood. Mercury accumulates in the food chain, meaning larger fish have much higher levels of the metal than smaller fish.
- **Water** – mercury can enter the environment from various industrial uses and find its way into water sources. Municipal water systems filter out mercury so the concentration is below 0.002 mg/L. If you use private well water, be sure to get your well tested for mercury.
- **Commercial products** - people can be exposed to elemental mercury through certain dental fillings and from mercury-containing products that break and allow the metal to vaporize.
- **Workplace exposure** – people can be exposed to elemental mercury in work settings like mining, manufacturing, or dentistry, where mercury-containing products are handled.

Health Effects

Mercury exposure can lead to a variety of health issues. Inhalation of elemental mercury vapor affects the nervous system, causing symptoms like tremors, cognitive impairment, and mood changes. Organic mercury is particularly toxic to fetuses and can result in developmental issues for newborns and children. It is similarly toxic for adults, but the signs and symptoms of organic mercury poisoning can be subtle. Symptoms can include loss of peripheral vision, “pins and needles” feeling, lack of coordination, muscle weakness, and impairment of speech, hearing, or walking. Organic mercury has also been shown to harm the kidneys, heart, immune system, and fertility. Inorganic mercury compounds mainly affect the kidneys and neurologic function, but have also been shown to harm the heart, blood, immune system, and fertility.

How to Limit Exposure

The best way to reduce mercury exposure is by limiting consumption of certain types of fish. Fish that are high in the food chain are more likely to contain higher levels of mercury. Opt for seafoods such as salmon, shrimp, sardines, anchovies, trout, tilapia, or catfish which tend to have lower concentrations of mercury. Cooking and cleaning fish or seafood does not remove mercury. Always follow local fishing advisories and do not eat fish that come from a contaminated body of water.

If you have a dental amalgam containing mercury, do not worry! The FDA recommends keeping fillings intact if they are in good condition and there is no surrounding decay. It is recommended that future fillings avoid using mercury, especially for children, pregnant women, and nursing mothers. Talk to your dentist if you are concerned about your dental fillings.

For those who live in areas like the San Luis Valley that are near historic mining sites or have unique geologic formations, mercury levels in groundwater may be elevated. Regular monitoring of private wells and considering filtration options can help residents reduce mercury exposure through drinking water.

Additional Resources

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has [additional information](#) on mercury and seafood, including guidelines on fish consumption.

Sources

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (n.d.). *Fish consumption advisories in Colorado*. <https://cdphe.colorado.gov/water-quality/clean-water/rivers-lakes-and-streams/fish-consumption-advisories-in-colorado> (accessed February 25, 2026)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2024). *Guidelines for eating fish that contain mercury*. <https://www.epa.gov/mercury/guidelines-eating-fish-contain-mercury> (accessed February 25, 2026)

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