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HEALTH DEPARTMENT WARNS PEOPLE WHO USE MERCURY
OF POTENTIAL MERCURY POISONING

New York City Acting Health Commissioner Dr. Margaret A. Hamburg today warned people who use mercury about the danger of mercury poisoning.

Mercury (which is also known as quicksilver or azogue) is the silver-colored liquid metal found in thermometer bulbs.

Acting Commissioner Hamburg said, "Using mercury for personal, religious, or spiritual reasons is not illegal -- but it can be dangerous. Liquid mercury produces an invisible, odorless, and tasteless gas and where ever there is mercury, there is also mercury vapor." She explained that this gas is breathed in through the lungs, and is highly poisonous to the brain and kidneys.

New York City Health Department pediatrician Dr. Susan Blank said, "Mercury poisoning can sneak up on you. There are no clear warning signs. Because the symptoms of mercury poisoning -- shaking, headache, personality changes, loss of appetite, tiredness, kidney problems, and cough -- are common to many diseases, you may not recognize the symptoms until it's too late and permanent damage has occurred."

The extent of poisoning, Dr. Blank noted, is related to how much mercury is taken in by the body. Breathing mercury vapor is more likely to make a person sick than touching or swallowing mercury.

Dr. Blank continued, "Mercury is especially poisonous to children, and children, who often play on floors close to where mercury may have been spilled, are the most likely to breathe in large amounts of mercury gas. In children, mercury poisoning may show up as learning disabilities and emotional disturbances."

If you or anyone in your family has had contact with mercury, find out more about mercury poisoning. The Health Department offers free and confidential testing for you, your family, and your workplace.

If you or anyone in your family needs medical help for mercury poisoning, the Department will help you get it. The Department can also assist with clean-up arrangements, mercury substitutes, and the safe handling and disposal of mercury.

For more information, call the Environmental Epidemiology Unit at (212) 566-6608. Spanish and English are spoken.

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