

Protect Yourself from Mercury in your Well Water

Mercury

is a metal that occurs naturally at low levels in rock, soil and water. Mercury also gets into the air, water and land during the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas), municipal solid waste, medical waste or forest fires. It also gets into the environment during some manufacturing processes.



How does mercury get into well water?

- Mercury can leak into underground water supplies from industrial and hazardous waste sites.
- Mercury in improperly disposed household products, such as mercury-containing outdoor paints, can move through the soil and reach private well water supplies.
- Past applications of mercury-based pesticides on agricultural lands, such as farms and fruit orchards, can wash into nearby surface waters or travel through the soil into underground water supplies.

How do I know if my well contains unsafe levels of mercury?

Contact the Environmental Health Section of your local health department to have your water tested. Make sure that the sample is tested specifically for mercury, since this chemical is not included in routine tests. The cost of the test varies from county to county.

You should have your water tested for harmful chemicals every 2 to 3 years.

If you have high levels of mercury in your drinking water:

- Switch to bottled water for all drinking and cooking. Boiling water is not recommended, as it can release certain forms of mercury into the air and increase levels of inorganic mercury in the water.
- You may wish to consider water treatment methods specially designed to remove mercury. Contact the Environmental Health Section at your local health department for recommended procedures. You may find additional information about appropriate filters by contacting NSF International at **1-877-8NSF-HELP (1-877-867-3435)** or on their website, **www.nsf.org**.
- In some instances you may need to drill a deeper well, tap into a different aquifer (underground water), or get an alternative source of drinking water such as public or city water.

How can mercury affect my health?

- High levels of mercury can cause serious damage to the brain, nervous system and kidneys.
- Children under 15 and developing fetuses are at greatest risk of the harmful effects of mercury.

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When should I see a doctor?

If you think you have been exposed to high levels of mercury, you should see a doctor. Your doctor can do a blood test to find out if you have high levels of mercury. If mercury levels in your blood are high, we recommend referral to Duke University, Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, (919) 286-3232.

Whom can I call for questions?

Contact your local health department if you have additional questions, or the N.C. Division of Public Health (N.C. Department of Health and Human Services) Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Branch (919) 707-5900.

Additional Information

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sets a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) for mercury in drinking water of 0.002 mg/L.

Websites

Safe Water and Private Wells:

EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 1-800-426-4791
www.epa.gov/safewater/privatewells/index2.html

NSF International:

1-877-8NSF-HELP (1-877-867-3435)
www.nsf.org

Mercury ATSDR Fact Sheet:

www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html

N.C. DHHS and Local Health Departments:

N.C. Care-Line 1-800-662-7030
(TTY for the hearing-impaired: 1-877-452-2514)
www.ncdhhs.gov

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about mercury in well water. This information is important because mercury has the potential to cause illness. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on how much you get into your body, how it enters your body, for how long you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

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