

Mercury Thermometers

Hazard: Mercury thermometers pose a threat to human health and the environment when broken or disposed of as trash. The breakage of mercury thermometers is one of the most common accidents in research labs. When mercury thermometers break, drops of the liquid metal become lodged in floor cracks and behind equipment. Mercury is volatile at room temperature and it evaporates fast with a high saturation vapor pressure. It easily forms hazardous concentrations of mercury in air. The vapors are odorless, colorless, and tasteless. Once absorbed or inhaled it accumulates in fat as organomercury compounds which are more toxic than the metallic form of mercury.

Safety: Substitute non-mercury thermometers whenever possible. Before accidental breakage takes place mercury thermometers should be submitted to the Office of Research Safety for recycling or disposal. Any labs choosing to retain mercury thermometers or other mercury-containing equipment must have a mercury spill kit available. Personnel must be trained to use this kit in case of breakage. Broken thermometer fragments, mercury and mercury cleanup materials must be collected in a sealed container, labeled with a Hazardous Waste tag, and submitted for pickup as hazardous waste.

Contact the Office of Research Safety at ext. 8-6114 or labsafety@uthsc.edu to properly dispose of thermometers and other mercury-containing equipment.

