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Description

Pediatrican Dr. Mark Widome urges parents and doctors to safely discard mercury thermometers, which can break and spread toxic mercury through the air and water supply.

Keywords

Mercury, Thermometer, Hazard, Danger, Toxic, Poison, Quicksilver, Vaporizes, Air, Kidneys, Brains, Blood Cells, Health, Personal, Public, Waste, Hazardous, Household, Medical, Landfills, Incinerators, Lakes, Streams, Fish, Women, Pregnant, Trade-In, Vacuum Cleaner, Plastic Bag, Seal, Health Department, FDA, Food and Drug Administration, Drug Stores, Duluth, Minnesota, San Francisco, Ban

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Transcript

Mercury Thermometers, Still Found in Many Medicine Cabinets, are a Hazard

ANN CURRY, co-host:
This morning on TODAY'S HEALTH, mercury thermometers. The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report this week calling on doctors and parents to stop using mercury thermometers because of the potential hazards to children. Pediatrician and TODAY contributor Dr. Mark Widome is here to explain the dangers and show us alternatives. Dr. Widome, good morning.

DR. MARK WIDOME (TODAY Contributor): Good morning, Ann.
CURRY: A lot of people have these in their homes...

DR. WIDOME: They do.
CURRY: ...and don't realize the danger. It's the mercury.

DR. WIDOME: There's millions of them, you know, but mercury thermometers have been used for taking peoples temperatures for about 150 years now, but, in fact, mercury is a toxic poison. There's two main problems with the mercury that's in thermometers. One is a personal health problem. The other is a public health problem. If the mercury spills on the floor, if the thermometer breaks. Remember as we were kids we used to play with that--with that quick silver? Don't do that. It vaporizes, goes into the air, and it could be poisonous to your kidneys and to your brain and to your blood cells and to other parts of your body. So that--that--that's--you shouldn't do. The other problem with these mercury thermometers is they eventually get discarded. It's said that about 17 tons of medical mercury gets discarded every year. And you know what happens to that? It ends up in landfills and incinerators and it eventually finds its way into the lakes and streams. Fish eat it. And if people, particularly pregnant women and children, eat too much of that fish, causes the same kind of brain problems and problems to other part of the body.

CURRY: Well, with this new recommendation, more and more of these are going to be discarded, so how should they be discarded?
DR. WIDOME: Well, first, the ideal thing to do is to take it--take the thermometer to a household hazardous waste facility. Now, I don't know if there's one on this block. And I know there isn't one on our block, but more and more communities are having trade-in programs where you can trade in a mercury thermometer for a--an alternative kind of thermometer or get a coupon for an alternative kind of thermometer. Probably the best thing to do is to keep it in its case, put it away, wait until there's a trade-in program...

CURRY: Or call your state health department or something like that.

DR. WIDOME: ...and then trade it in. You--you can do that if you're motivated.

CURRY: And if one breaks in your home...

DR. WIDOME: If one breaks...

CURRY: ...don't use the vacuum cleaner to clean it up.

DR. WIDOME: Don't use the vacuum cleaner because remember I said the problem--eating mercury won't hurt you, will go right through your body. It doesn't get absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract. But if it gets vaporized into the air and you breathe it in, the vacuum cleaner will help agitate it. And the heat of the vacuum cleaner will—will throw it into the air. So you want to scoop it up very carefully with paper or cardboard. Put it in a plastic baggie, seal it, put that baggie in another baggie, and then call your local health department or environmental resources office and find out where a household toxic waste recycling facility is so that you can get rid of it, and they can—they can use it--reuse it rather than it get into the waste stream.

CURRY: Hospitals are now banning these devices?

DR. WIDOME: Well, the American Hospital Association has agreed, has voluntarily agreed with the FDA over a period of years to stop using mercury in blood pressure apparatus and other kinds of medical equipment just for this reason.

CURRY: What about drugstores? Can you still buy these--these kinds of thermometers?

DR. WIDOME: A lot of drug--drugstores are not ordering new mercury thermometers from their suppliers. A few of the large chains are taking them off shelves. I still see them on the store--on then shelves in the stores here in New York, but in some states, particularly in Minnesota and in Maryland and in some localities such as San Francisco and Duluth, Minnesota, there are ordinances or state laws to--to try to get these things off the shelves.