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Recycle mercury responsibly

Before digital thermometers became popular, mercury-filled glass thermometers could be found in just about every home and doctor's office.

At the time, no one knew that mercury was harmful; the only thing that concerned moms and doctors was that the patient might get a mouthful of glass if he or she bit down too hard.

But we now know that mercury is extremely harmful, and as a result, thermometers made today are either digital or contain an alcohol-based red or blue liquid, instead of mercury.

Many other household items might also contain mercury, like antique grandfather clocks, antique barometers, and older thermostats with tilt switches to control the temperature.

Energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs, or CFLs, also contain a very small amount of mercury, which is not necessarily harmful, but when your CFL bulb burns out, it should be properly recycled. You can also check with a home improvement store, as they often recycle CFL bulbs.

Free-flowing mercury is something else to be on the lookout for. This dense, silver liquid is usually stored in glass jars and long forgotten in garages, basements, crawl spaces, or pole barns.

If you find a container and think it might contain mercury, do not open it or throw it away. Instead, have it properly recycled.

So what makes mercury so dangerous? When mercury spills, the silver puddles that form give off an invisible vapor. Breathing this vapor can cause learning and behavior disorders, mood changes, seizures and kidney damage.

According to Mid-Michigan District Health Department Environmental Health Director Bob Gouin, it is a good idea to remove any mercury-containing items from your home before they have a chance to break.

If you have an old mercury thermometer or other household item that contains mercury, contact the MMDHD at 989-875-1002 in Gratiot County, 989-227-3110 in Clinton County or 989-831-3607 in Montcalm County for recycling instructions.

If a mercury spill should occur, act quickly to get people and pets out of the room, then open a window and close all doors that lead to the contaminated area. If the spill is small, like from a thermometer, you can most likely handle the cleanup yourself, as long as you follow the proper precautions.

Larger spills, however, can be dangerous, so it's best to call a professional. To learn what is considered a large or small spill, to find do-it-yourself instructions for cleaning up a small spill, or a list of professionals experienced in mercury cleanup, visit www.michigan.gov/mdch or call 800-292-4706.

(The Mid-Michigan District Health Department serves the residents of Gratiot, Clinton and Montcalm counties)