

## Mercury

Mercury is a naturally occurring heavy metal with unusual properties (including being liquid at room temperature) that make it suitable for a variety of uses. It is found in numerous products such as thermometers, thermostats, fluorescent and neon light bulbs, batteries and dental fillings. Groups who practice Santaria (a religion native to Haiti) sprinkle mercury in their homes for good luck.

Mercury is also toxic (even in small quantities) and can cause neurological, brain and organ damage; coma; and death. Very young children are especially sensitive to the effects of mercury. Elemental mercury is most toxic when breathed in as a vapor. Compounds of mercury are often extremely toxic by any route of exposure.

Mercury has been widely used historically as a medication. Mercury

chloride was used as a diuretic, disinfectant and laxative and was also used to treat syphilis although it was so toxic that its effects were worse than the disease. Blue mass (a mercury pill) was prescribed during the 19th century for various ailments.

In the early 20th century, mercury was given to children annually as a dewormer and laxative and was used as a tooth powder for infants. Mercurochrome was widely used as an antiseptic in the U.S. on the baby-boomer generation.

Poisoning from mercury has not always been recognized. In 19th century England, felt hat makers inhaled mercury vapors and suffered symptoms including memory loss, excitability and delirium. The phrase “mad as a

hatter” became common and inspired the character in Alice in Wonderland.

Mercury builds up in the tissues of fish. Larger and older fish tend to have the highest levels of mercury. In the middle part of the last century in Minimata Japan, over 1000 residents died (with many more disabled) after eating fish contaminated with mercury compounds.

Mercury-contaminated grain claimed 6,000 victims (500 deaths) in Iraq in 1971-72. A medical researcher in New England in 1997 spilled a drop of organic mercury on her gloved hand and died within months.



## Mercury Moments in History

**200 BC:** China’s first emperor, Qin Shi Huang Di, is driven insane and killed by mercury pills intended to give him eternal life.

**1803:** The Lewis and Clark expedition uses mercury to unsuccessfully treat syphilis, gon-

orrhoea and constipation.

**1828:** Mercury amalgam is first used to fill teeth.

**1860:** Abe Lincoln is poisoned by mercury pills he takes for depression. He stops taking the little blue pills after he observes that they make him “cross.”

**1942:** Allied spies use mercury paste to sabotage German planes. It rapidly corrodes aluminum and causes mysterious structural failures.

**1962:** Mercury (a robot) is introduced as a character in Metal Men Comics. He is “hot-headed.”

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### Did you Know?

- Mercury has been found in Egyptian tombs dating to 1500 BC.
- The chemical symbol for mercury (Hg) is derived from the Latin word hydrargyrum, meaning liquid silver.
- Mercury was the Roman god for trade, profit and commerce. His name is related to the Latin word for merchandise. He was the messenger of the gods.



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## Top 10 Rejected Meanings for “OGI”

10. Orders of the Golden Iguana
9. Office of Government Integrity\*
8. Organization for Global Initiatives\*
7. OGI\* (a fermented cereal porridge from West Africa)
6. Otlandish Games Incorporated\*
5. Office of Gross Integration\*
4. Ohio Grape Industries\*
3. Obstetrical and Gynecological Information\*
2. Orchestra Giovanile Italiana\*
1. OGI\* (see photo at left)

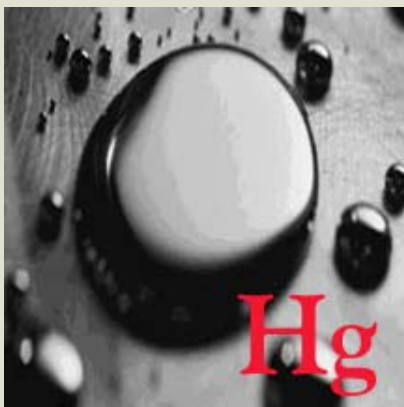
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\*Actual organization  
or thing

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## Mercury Misfortune

Michael was a 17-year old local high school student whose family left him alone for a few weeks while they visited relatives in California. He was bored and decided to snoop through some of his great uncle's belongings and came upon



a small glass jar containing several inches of a silvery liquid. The jar contained mercury, which his great uncle had used when he worked in a California gold mine in the 1960s.

Michael poured some of the contents onto the ground in the back yard. He took the jar outside so that if it exploded, the house would be okay. It didn't explode, so Michael took the jar inside and played with the mercury for weeks, rubbing it on his hands and swallowing some of it. It reminded him of the silvery metallic villain in "Terminator 2." He also poured mercury onto the hands of friends and relatives.

Mercury poisoning, which can be fatal, causes personality changes, nervousness

and trembling. Michael first developed a rash all over his body which soon faded. Not long after, he felt a lack of energy, his fingers tingled and he couldn't run. After being admitted to the hospital, his blood pressure spiked, his hands still tingled and he was only able to walk slowly or risk falling.

Mercury readings 150 times higher than acceptable background levels were found in Michael's house. The highest mercury concentrations were found in his bedroom. Earliest estimates for the decontamination and cleanup of the house were in excess of \$500,000. Initially, no one else tested positive for mercury poisoning, however Snowball, the family dog, had to be shaved to remove his contaminated fur.