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Mercury Thermometer Collection Program Launched Across Colorado

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Tri-County Health Department have joined forces to institute a statewide program to collect and safely dispose of mercury thermometers as part of the “Mercury-Free Colorado Campaign.”

Tri-County Health Department serves Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas counties in the Denver metropolitan area. Thermometers are being collected through July at their offices in Aurora, Castle Rock, Commerce City and Englewood.

The collection program is designed to prevent household exposure to mercury, to reduce mercury pollution in the environment, and to educate people about the hazards associated with mercury.

Coloradans are asked to take their mercury thermometers, which can be identified through the silver or gray-colored liquid which they contain, to disposal locations in the original protective case or inside an empty plastic water or soft drink bottle to prevent breakage.

Justin Laboe, an environmental health specialist for the Tri-County Health Department, explained that when they are used correctly and disposed of properly, mercury fever thermometers are not hazardous. However, when mercury thermometers break, the droplets are very difficult to clean up and dangerous levels of mercury vapor may be inhaled, he explained.

He said that, as a result, thermometers with red-colored liquid contain alcohol or mineral spirits are a much better alternative to mercury thermometers because they are not hazardous. Most grocery stores and pharmacies carry these red-colored, non-mercury thermometers as well as digital thermometers.

More information is available by visiting the Tri-County Health Department website at www.tchd.org; calling Justin Laboe at 720-322-1541; visiting the Mercury-Free Colorado Campaign Web site at www.cdphe.state.co.us/hm/mercury/ or by calling 1-888-569-1831, Ext. 3320.

Laboe said that only thermometers are being accepted for recycling as part of the campaign. Thermostats; switches; gauges; mercury vapor lights; hearing aid and watch batteries; and children's shoes with flashers in the soles all contain mercury, but cannot be accepted as part of this recycling program.

These items are not an immediate hazard, but consumers should be aware that these kinds of products contain mercury and should be disposed of properly through a local household hazardous waste program.

Laboe said that, in addition to recycling thermometers through the "Mercury-Free Colorado" program, consumers are urged to buy products that do not contain mercury. Digital thermometers and rechargeable batteries do not contain mercury and, as a result, are much better choices environmentally, he explained.

Mercury is a widespread and highly toxic metal that poses a significant threat to both human health and the environment. Exposure to mercury can cause serious health problems, including neurological disorders in children and adults.

The most common exposure to mercury is by eating fish and shellfish that contain mercury. According to health officials, pregnant and nursing women, as well as children under the age of nine, should limit their intake of fish that might contain mercury. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has detailed food contamination information on its Web site, www.epa.gov/mercury/.

Improper disposal of mercury thermometers also is a source of harmful mercury in the air, water and soil.

More information about the dangers of mercury and how other products containing mercury can be disposed of can be obtained by visiting the Mercury-Free Colorado Web site at www.cdphe.state.co.us/hm/mercury/ or by calling the Department of Public Health and Environment's Hazardous Materials and Waste Management Division at (303) 692-3320 or toll free at 1-888-569-1831, Ext. 3320.