

Mercury Switches

Mercury is a highly toxic metal that is hazardous to both humans and wildlife. Mercury occurs in both liquid and vapor form, and is used in various automobile components. Capsules of mercury are found in the tilting hood and trunk light switch assemblies of GM, Ford, Chrysler, and other motor vehicles. Mercury is also found in other motor vehicle devices, including ABS sensors, display screen back lighting, and HID head lamps.

Mercury can be released to the environment when motor vehicles are crushed, shredded, or put through a smelter. Unfortunately, once mercury is released to the environment, it does not break down into less toxic components. Instead, it accumulates and persists in the environment, where it can contaminate water and enter the food chain.

The best way for motor vehicle recyclers to manage mercury is to take charge of the problem and remove mercury-containing parts for recycling. Mercury switches are easy to remove. The mercury-containing capsule in the lighting assembly is almost always attached to the base of the light

bulb (see photos below). It is fairly simple to pry it loose and collect it for recycling. By following the best management practices listed below, you can help reduce the amount of mercury released to the environment, and protect your health and the health of future generations.

REMEMBER...

- Mercury is extremely toxic to the human nervous system and can impair the way we see, hear, walk, talk and think.
- Removing mercury switches before a vehicle is crushed prevents the mercury from being released to the environment.
- Mercury does not break down. Once it is released to the environment, it stays there **forever**.



Best Management Practices for Mercury Switches

- Establish a routine for dismantling vehicles that includes removing mercury switches **BEFORE** storing or crushing the car.
- Know which vehicles are likely to have mercury switches. Many older vehicles have mercury switches, while only a few newer models do. For a list of vehicles that have mercury switches, call the NHDES at (603) 271-6398.

- Remove the entire switch assembly and carefully pry the mercury-containing capsule out, over or in a containment device, such as a drip pan or tray.
- Take care not to puncture or break the capsules. **NEVER** break open any mercury-containing device nor try to remove the mercury yourself.
- Store the mercury switch capsules in a sturdy plastic container with a lid. Do not store mercury switches in metal containers because leaked mercury may combine with the metal and leak through seams.
- Label the plastic container: “Universal Waste Mercury-Containing Devices for Recycling. Do NOT Throw in the Garbage. Close Lid When Not in Use,” and mark it with the fill-start date.
- Recycle mercury switches and other mercury-containing devices within a year of collection. For a list of approved mercury recyclers, call the NHDES at (603) 271-6398.
- If mercury switches are not sent to a recycling company, they must be sent to a hazardous waste disposal facility.
- Keep records at least three years to show how many switches you have recycled, who transported them, the date, and where they were recycled. A bill of lading is acceptable.
- Store mercury switches in a safe area, where there is little threat of fire and away from heavy traffic.
- Keep a spill kit nearby. It should contain a medicine dropper, latex or rubber gloves, fine steel wool, plastic or cardboard scraper, tweezers, and a sturdy plastic container with a lid.
- If mercury is spilled, contact the NHDES Spill Response & Complaint Investigation Section at (603) 271-3899 for assistance. Post this contact information in an easily visible location.
- If the spill is small, you may be able clean it up yourself with guidance provided by the NHDES Spill Response & Complaint Investigation Section and using the spill kit items described above.
- **NEVER** vacuum up spilled mercury.

This guide sheet provides general guidance only.

For additional information, contact:

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