

Module 5

Cultural Uses of Mercury

Learning Objectives

- Understand mercury's impact on human health and the environment
- Recognize typical uses of mercury
- Be familiar with available response measures to protect against mercury

Why is Mercury an Issue?

- Mercury and its compounds are recognized as highly toxic substances
- Mercury's toxic effects include:
 - Harm to the central nervous system
 - Neurological and behavioral disorders
 - Kidney and thyroid problems
- Mercury is more likely to adversely affect children than adults

Why is Mercury an Issue?

- Mercury is toxic to ourselves and to our environment
- Yet, mercury is used in many cultures for religious and cultural reasons
- When the mercury is emitted into our air and water

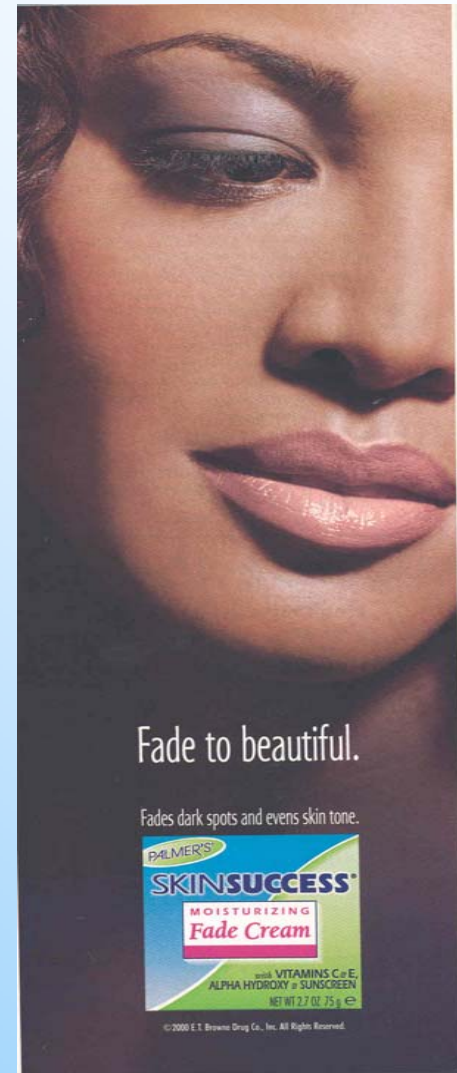
How Am I Exposed to Mercury?

- Mercury can enter the body if it is ingested, injected, touched, or inhaled
- Sometimes, mercury is left out in the open air to “purify” a car or a home
 - Mercury easily vaporizes, even if you cannot see it happen

What is the History of Mercury Use for Cultural Purposes?

- Mercury has been used for hundreds of years
- Some believe that mercury brings good fortune, wealth and love
- Others believe that it confers immortality

Mercury in Beauty Products



Mercury in Beauty Products

- Acne



Mercury in Beauty Products

- Hyperpigmentation
- Kidney and/or nervous system problems



Mercury in Beauty Products

Location and Activity	Mercury Content
Women using mercury soap	122 mg/kg
Fish consumers near gold mining in Amazon	75 mg/kg
Fish consumers in Bolivia	16 mg/kg
Non-miners at Lake Victoria	1.1 mg/kg
Danes (average)	0.6 mg/kg
<small>* Source: Mercury in Soap in Tanzania, NERI Technical Report # 306. 1999. Greer, Linda E. email: lgreer@nrdc.org</small>	

Is Mercury Mistakenly Used to Improve Health?

- Mercury Capsules
 - Known as *Azogue*, they are sold in Mexico
 - Used to dislodge gastrointestinal blockages
- Mercury in the home
 - Mercury is exposed to the air so that it is purified
 - Common in Latin American and Caribbean communities living in New York City

Does Mercury Have Other Uses?



- Mercury is:
 - Sometimes sprinkled on the floor to protect occupants
 - Used with water to spiritually clean a floor
 - Added to oil lamps or candles to ward off evil spirits or to bring good luck
 - Sometimes an ingredient in love spells

What Are the Risks?

- Risks are involved in the storage, transport and handling of mercury
- Poorly ventilated areas, such as cars, result in high mercury concentrations
 - 80% of the inhaled mercury enters the bloodstream
- New residents may be poisoned by exposure to mercury left by previous residents
 - Mercury can linger in cracks, carpeting, dirt and concrete for many years

What Can Governments Do?

- Governments can:
 - Educate community groups and their leaders about the risks of mercury
 - Design and distribute information on mercury exposure, risks and symptoms
 - Meet with key members of cultural groups and distributors using or selling mercury

What Can Governments Do?

- Governments can:
 - Measure contamination levels at locations where mercury is sold
 - Develop printed information on mercury
 - Place leaflets in schools, hospitals and other visible public places
 - Promote voluntary initiatives to reduce mercury

What Can Governments Do?

- Governments can:
 - Regulate the import and export of mercury
 - Require that mercury is labeled as hazardous on the products that contain it
 - Properly enforce a prohibition on mercury containing substances
 - Properly secure waste management facilities

What Are the Main Messages?

- Mercury is very toxic
- Mercury is used in many different cultural and religious practices
- Reducing mercury demand can only be achieved by working closely with community leaders
- If adequately enforced, government regulations on mercury can be effective

Additional Resources

- **The Ritual Use of Mercury**
www.homepage.mac.com/cynthiagraber
- **Mercury Poisoning Project**
www.mercurypoisoningproject.org
- **The Use of Mercury for Cultural and Religious Purposes**
www.archive.naccho.org/documents/MercuryFactsheet.pdf
- **or contact mercury@unep.org**