

## **What's going on with compact fluorescent light bulbs and mercury?**

*By: Jennifer Taylor*

Sitting in my home surfing the Internet one rainy afternoon, I came across an article about mercury in compact fluorescent light bulbs. Since several of my lamps and light fixtures have CFLs, I wanted to know, "What's going on with them and mercury?"



CFLs save money, use less electricity and help promote energy efficiency. But, what if a bulb breaks or burns out? I can easily picture my manic feline, Otis the cat, turning a lamp over and breaking the CFL. Is the amount of mercury in the bulb harmful? How would I clean it up safely? After a quick switch to the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site, I learned there were no serious concerns.

### **How do you clean up a broken CFL?**

According to the EPA, the greatest risk if a bulb breaks is getting cut from the glass shards. Research indicates that there is no immediate health risk to people should a bulb break if it is cleaned up properly:

- Sweep up, do not vacuum, the glass fragments and particles.
- Place the broken pieces in a sealed plastic bag and wipe the area with a damp paper towel to pick up any remaining stray shards or particles. Put the paper towel in the sealed plastic bag when you are finished.
- If weather permits, open the windows and ventilate the room.

### **What should you do with a CFL when it burns out?**

Like paint, batteries, thermostats and other hazardous items, CFLs should be disposed of properly. The EPA is working with CFL manufacturers and U.S. retailers to expand disposal options. You can search for disposal options online by using your zip code at [www.earth911.com](http://www.earth911.com), calling (877) EARTH-911 or visiting [www.lamprecycle.org](http://www.lamprecycle.org)

Also, check with your local waste management agency. If a disposal site is not available in your area, the EPA suggests placing the burned-out or broken bulb in a plastic bag, which should be sealed before being placed in the trash. Never send a CFL or other mercury-containing product to an incinerator.

The benefits of CFLs greatly outweigh the risks. "There is only a very small amount of mercury in CFLs, hardly enough to worry about," said Jim Stine, Senior Principal, Environmental Policy Department for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. "On average, the bulbs contain five milligrams of mercury. Compare that to 3,000 milligrams of mercury in older thermostats and 500 milligrams of mercury in a mercury thermometer." Switching from traditional light bulbs to CFLs is an effective, accessible change every American can make to save energy and help the environment.

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Source: Environmental Protection Agency, ENERGY STAR® and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.