

Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs:

What to do if one breaks

Compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) contain a small amount of mercury sealed within their glass tubing. If a CFL bulb breaks, mercury can be directly released as an odourless, colourless vapour, and can also stick to the powder on the inside of the bulb. Exposure to even small amounts of mercury can cause serious health problems. It is particularly harmful to the developing brains of fetuses, infants and children.



What to do if a CFL breaks in your home:

1

Immediate steps

- Remove people and pets.
- Make sure children and pregnant women are not involved in any cleanup.
- Open windows and close all doors. Leave the room and let it air out for at least 10 to 15 minutes.
- Turn off the heating system. Heat will make the mercury rise into the air more quickly.

2

Clean up on hard surfaces

- DO NOT VACUUM or SWEEP! Vacuuming or sweeping will spread the mercury vapour into the air more quickly.
- Wearing rubber gloves, scoop up larger glass fragments with stiff cardboard.
- Use sticky tape to pick up the small glass pieces and any powder.
- Wipe hard surfaces with a damp paper towel or cloth, or disposable wet wipes.





3

Clean up on carpets or rugs

- Clean up large pieces as described under “hard surfaces,” above.
- Then, if the bulb has broken on an area rug, consider discarding the entire rug. Otherwise, take the rug outdoors and shake and air it out for as long as is practical.
- For installed carpet, shut the door to the room or close off the area as much as possible. Open any windows and doors to the outside. Vacuum the rug as usual, then remove the bag and, as much as possible, wipe the vacuum inside and out with a damp paper towel or cloth. Put the bag and paper towel outside in a sealed plastic bag.
- Continue to air out the room for several hours once the clean up is completed.



4

Disposing of a broken CFL

- Put clean-up materials and glass fragments in a glass container (for example, a jar with a tight-fitting lid). If a glass container is not available, use a sealable plastic bag.
- To prevent mercury vapour from escaping, place the glass container or bag outside the house and attached garage immediately after clean up.
- Dispose of the jar or bag of CFL materials as hazardous waste if local facilities exist. Check with your local municipal and provincial/territorial government about disposal requirements.
- Wash your hands and arms thoroughly after both clean up and disposal.

Additional tips

- To reduce the risk of exposure to mercury from broken bulbs, avoid the use of CFLs in areas where they could break easily (e.g., crawl space).
- Remove and install a CFL by handling only the base of the lamp to prevent pressure on the glass that may cause it to break.
- Store new and used CFLs in containers that prevent them from breaking, such as in their original packaging.

Useful resources

- Health Canada. [The Safety of Compact Fluorescent Lamps.](#)
- Environment Canada. [Mercury and the Environment.](#)
- Connecticut Dept. of Public Health. [Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs: What to Do if a Bulb Breaks.](#)
- The [Earth 911](#) website provides a searchable database for disposal and recycling centres in Canada, the US and internationally.

Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment (CPCHE) – Partner Organizations

