

Recycling fluorescent lights

Last month's GreenerDENR promoted the energy-saving advantages of CFL and LED lighting for the home. While CFLs are great for saving energy and money, there is a downside. CFLs and fluorescent tubes contain mercury, which is a hazardous material.



The amount of mercury in a CFL is about 5 mg (about the size of a ball point pen tip) for bulbs 25 watts and below, and 6 mg for CFLs 26 watts and higher. This is about one-fifth the amount of mercury found in the average watch battery and less than 1/100th of the mercury found in the typical amalgam dental filling.

The mercury in a CFL poses no threat while in the bulb, but it is recommended that if you break a bulb you do the following:

- open a window and leave the room for at least 15 minutes
- use a wet rag to clean up the pieces, put the rag with the pieces in a plastic bag and seal the bag shut
- do not use a vacuum cleaner for cleanup as it may spread mercury vapor
- place plastic bag in second plastic bag and seal this bag shut as well
- call your recycling center to see if they will accept the material, such as on hazardous waste recycling days, otherwise put the bags in the trash.

Despite their mercury content, energy-efficient fluorescent lights help achieve a greater net reduction in mercury by reducing mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants.

DENR's Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance has developed a Web site designed to help answer questions from government, business and households on the management and recycling of fluorescent lights. The Web site, found at <http://www.p2pays.org/Fluorescent/index.asp> provides information on the regulatory status of fluorescents, recycling options and other guidance on related environmental and general issues.

Recycling fluorescent lights is the best way to further minimize release of mercury to the environment. Households have a number of recycling options. For example, [Home Depot](#) and Ikea stores recently announced that they would accept burned-out CFLs for recycling.

A new state convenience contract makes it cheaper and easier for state agencies, universities, community colleges, schools and local government agencies to comply with regulations in properly managing spent fluorescent bulbs and other mercury-containing devices. Contract details can be found at: <http://www.doa.state.nc.us/PandC/926b.pdf>.

CFLs remain a cost-effective way to save energy and reduce overall mercury pollution. Until LED lighting becomes more cost competitive with CFLs and fluorescents, we should strive to make sure mercury-containing fluorescents are handled carefully and recycled when possible at home and at work.