

Mercury in Eye Surgery Settings: Is there mercury hiding in your clinic or office?

This is a reprint of a 2004 factsheet

Mercury has a history of use in eye surgery, where little bags of mercury were used as weights to apply pressure to the eye prior to cataract surgery. The formal name for this type of device is a mercury **intraocular pressure reducer**, but it is sometimes referred to as a “little bag of mercury” or by the brand name “wee bag o’mercury”¹. Mercury weights are no longer commercially available, and the practice of weighting the eye prior to cataract surgery is largely obsolete because of newer techniques and minimally invasive tools for surgery. Even so, a few facilities may have the mercury bags left behind in drawers or cabinets. Here are several suggestions for facilities that still have mercury intraocular pressure reducers.

- 1) Remove and recycle the mercury devices to keep mercury out of the environment. For recycling options, contact a hazardous waste company that deals with mercury or your state’s Department of Environmental Protection. In the interim, the mercury must be handled as Universal Waste². Handle and store the mercury bag(s) in a secure closed container, such as a glass container with a metal screw lid and seal like a canning jar, or a heavy-duty plastic container with a screw lid or tight push-on lid. All storage containers should be labeled with the contents (“Mercury Waste”) and the date you first put the mercury in it.
- 2) If surgeons still use intraocular weights, investigate new tools and techniques. This can be done through continuing education programs (such as those offered by professional societies), by researching peer-reviewed journal articles, and/or by contacting the manufacturer of your surgical tools for technical assistance. In any situation, it is important to always evaluate new products and practices carefully to assess safety and performance in your own setting.

The Safe Home Care and Hospitals Program is a research group within the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Department of Work Environment. Please send comments and questions to: SafeHomeCare@uml.edu. For more information, visit our website: www.uml.edu/SafeHC

¹ U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) 510(k) Application Details - K946194 for MICROSURGICAL TECHNOLOGY, INC.’s Wee Bag O’Mercury. Online (accessed 5/22/15) <http://www.510kdecisions.com/applications/index.cfm?id=K946194>

² EPA Hazardous Waste – Universal Wastes: Mercury-Containing Equipment. Online (accessed 5/22/15) <http://www.epa.gov/osw/hazard/wastetypes/universal/mce.htm#uwbatt>