

# Daily Southtown

## Busting Myths about A Bright Idea

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June 28, 2008



A tiny amount of mercury has led to some tall tales about money-saving Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs).

The tallest involves a Maine mother who last year sealed off her daughter's bedroom with plastic and thought she had to pay \$2,000

to clean up the trace amount of mercury in a single broken CFL.

These super-efficient bulbs use 75 percent less energy than traditional incandescents and last 10 times longer. When replacing your most-used bulbs, each CFL can cut electric bills by \$10 a year—so annual savings could easily reach hundreds of dollars.

But does a broken bulb really need to be treated like a federal disaster area? No.

The Maine mom's plight was sparked less by a toxic bulb and more by a toxic mix of miscommunication and overreaction. The broken bulb, which did NOT require a \$2,000 "HazMat" operation, was easier to clean up than the confusion. Here's what she should have been told from the start:

CFLs contain about 5 milligrams of mercury, just enough to fit on the tip of a ballpoint pen. That's about 100 times less than the old thermometers parents used to stick in their children's mouths.

Remember, the bulbs don't emit mercury unless they break. And even if that happens, you're unlikely to get hurt unless—as an official at Troy, New York's Lighting Research Center told Popular Mechanics—

"you wipe up mercury (without gloves) and then lick your hand."

Mercury can be found everywhere, including computer monitors, thermostats, and the tube-like fluorescents found in businesses, basements and even some kitchens. Although, incandescent bulbs don't contain mercury, because they use more energy, they lead to more mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants. That's why environmental groups support CFLs. A 60-watt incandescent bulb causes about five times the mercury emissions its CFL equivalent does, according to EnergyStar.gov.

Of course, mercury shouldn't be taken lightly, no matter how small the amount. So if a bulb breaks, don't panic. Just take some precautions. To be safe, wear disposable gloves, use stiff cardboard to pick up bigger glass fragments and sticky tape for smaller pieces and powder, wipe the area with damp paper towels, and seal the bulb and all clean-up materials in plastic bags. For full details, go to [www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org](http://www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org).

Because CFLs last longer, they reduce landfill waste, but like dead batteries, when CFLs finally do burn out, you shouldn't just throw them in the trash. They need to be recycled. Home Depot, Ikea, and Ace Hardware are just a few of the retailers that may accept unbroken and/or broken used CFLs. Just call ahead to make sure. Other sites can be found at [www.epa.gov/bulbrecycling](http://www.epa.gov/bulbrecycling) or [www.earth911.org](http://www.earth911.org).

Using CFLs is, literally, one of the brightest ideas I've ever seen in the battle against out-of-control energy markets and rate-hike hungry utilities. That's why CUB is dedicated to promoting their use and to busting myths about busted bulbs.