

Just How Safe are Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs?

Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative occasionally receives phone calls from members asking, "Just how safe are compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs)?" When asked what they mean, they reply that they heard that CFLs contain mercury. That is correct. In fact, all fluorescent light bulbs including the 4-foot long tubes contain mercury.

The next question asked is, "Does the health and environmental risks more than offset the energy and economic savings of utilizing CFLs or any other fluorescent light bulb?" The benefits of CFLs greatly outweigh the risks. According to Jim Stine, Senior Principal, Environmental Policy Department for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, "There is only a very small amount of mercury in CFLs, hardly enough to worry about." He continues, "On average, the bulbs contain five milligrams of mercury. Compare that to 3,000 milligrams of mercury in older wall-mounted thermostats and 500 milligrams of mercury in a mercury thermometer."

There is an environmental savings as well. CFLs use only one-fourth the energy of the equivalent wattage incandescent light bulb. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, approximately five times more mercury is released into the air from coal-fired generation plants to power a standard 60-watt incandescent light bulb than the 60-watt equivalent CFL bulb. The net savings on mercury emissions is close to 60 percent by using CFLs when you include the manufacturing.

The greatest risk from a CFL according to the EPA is getting cut from the glass shards if a bulb should break. However, there are proper procedures for cleaning up a broken CFL:

1. Sweep up, do not vacuum, the glass fragments and particles.
2. 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. Place the paper towel in the sealed plastic bag when finished.
3. Weather permitting, open the window and ventilate the room.

Care should be taken when disposing a broken or burned-out CFL. Like paint, batteries, thermostats and other hazardous items, CFLs should be disposed of properly. You can search for disposal options online by using your zip code at www.earth911.com or visiting www.lamprecycle.org. If you do not have access to the Internet, you can

call (877) EARTH-911. If a disposal site is not available in your area, the EPA suggests placing the burned-out or broken bulb in a sealed plastic bag before placing it in the trash. Never send a CFL or other mercury-containing product to an incinerator.

The benefits of switching to CFLs greatly outweigh any risks. Changing from traditional incandescent light bulbs to CFLs saves energy, money and protects the environment.

If you have any questions concerning the purchase or disposal of CFLs, please contact Eastern Illini's marketing department at 800-824-5102. For more information on being energy-wise visit our Web site at www.eiec.coop and click on the green light bulb. Eastern Illini is a Touchstone Energy Cooperative and your connection to powerful solutions.



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