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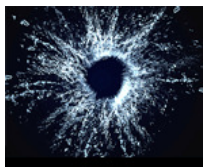
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Ask the expert: fluorescent light disposal



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Keith Rhodes 3 December 2015
Alcumus
Category: [Chemicals \(and COSHH\)](#)

Question:

We have a few offices with the standard fluorescent tube fittings. Recently, a spent tube stored for disposal shattered. We realised we have no safe system for dealing with this. Can you advise?

Answer:

There is mercury in the phosphor powder of fluorescent tubes. Broken tubes cause fugitive mercury emissions, which could contaminate the work environment and be inhaled as dust and vapour.

Public Health England reviewed the potential health effects of mercury exposure from broken compact fluorescent tubes. It found a small proportion of mercury vapour could be released if a tube is broken, but didn't consider this to be a health risk to anyone immediately exposed. But as a precautionary measure, ventilate any room in which a tube has shattered for 15 minutes.

Don't use a brush or a vacuum cleaner to remove the debris; this risks further contamination. Wear disposable gloves. Carefully scoop up the larger bits of glass with a piece of cardboard or similar, something you can easily get rid of along with the broken tube. Dispose of these in a sealed robust container and treat as hazardous waste. Once the big pieces are cleaned up, use a piece of duct tape to pick up small fragments and powder. Clean the area down with a damp paper towel. Seal all the contaminated cleaning materials and gloves in a robust container and treat as hazardous waste too. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water.

Most tubes break when they are being stored, rather than in use. Since prevention is better than cure, stack waste tubes neatly and don't throw them into waste containers. Linear and non-linear tubes should be placed in separate containers. The Hazardous Waste Regulations require all types of hazardous waste to be stored separately.

The mercury from a single fluorescent tube is enough to pollute 30,000 litres of water beyond the safe drinking level. As a result, all gas discharge lamps — including straight fluorescent tubes, compact fluorescents and high intensity discharge lamps — are classed as hazardous waste ("special waste" in Scotland). Putting a fluorescent tube into a skip condemns the whole skip as hazardous waste, with costly consequences for its removal.

Gas discharge lamps should be recycled or, if absolutely necessary, taken to one of the few specialist landfills handling mercury bearing waste.

Keith Rhodes, senior consultant, Alcumus Compliance, a leading health, safety and environmental consultancy whose specialists develop tailored and workable solutions.

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