

## **What to Do When Your CFL Light Bulbs Break**



With the emphasis on saving energy, many people are replacing their incandescent light bulbs with the newer compact fluorescent (CFL) ones. They do consume less energy to run and generally last longer, but what are the hazards associated with these bulbs?

They are generally considered to be safe to use; however, they do contain a small amount of mercury, and should be handled carefully when installing or removing them. This leads to concerns with proper disposal of them when they eventually do burn out, as mercury cannot go into landfills or into the general waste stream. CFL bulbs must be recycled to ensure the mercury is recovered safely.

BC has mandated recycling of fluorescent bulbs and tubes through the BC Recycling Regulation, and has approved an industry program called LightRecycle to achieve this.

There are many drop-off locations in BC where one can bring residential light bulbs and tubes to be recycled. To find a location near you Phone 1-800-667-4321 or go to this [website](#):

Another problem arises with what to do when they break. With incandescent bulbs all you have to do is sweep up the broken glass and metal bits and put it in the trash. Because of the mercury contained in fluorescents, Health Canada has issued guidelines to follow in order to minimize the exposure risk when a CFL bulb or tube is broken.

- Avoid stepping on the broken pieces; and remove people and pets from the room.
- Ventilate the room for at least 15 minutes before beginning clean-up.
- Wear disposable or kitchen cleaning type gloves to protect your hands.

Carefully scoop up the glass fragments, powder and metal bits with two pieces of stiff paper or cardboard. Do not use a broom or vacuum cleaner, as these can cause the mercury particles to become airborne, where they could be inhaled. Use sticky tape to pick up any more pieces and carefully wipe the area with a damp paper towel to pick up remaining fragments or tiny particles.

Place the broken bits and clean-up materials (tape, paper towels, gloves, etc.) in a glass or plastic container that can be tightly sealed. Alternatively, it can be double-bagged and sealed. Do not put the materials directly into a metal container. If a bulb has broken on a mat or throw rug, after picking up the pieces as above, take the rug outside and air it out as long as is practical.

When vacuuming carpet for the first time after the clean-up, shut the door or otherwise close off the area, and open the windows and outside doors to ventilate the room. When finished vacuuming, remove the bag, wipe the vacuum with a damp paper towel or wet wipe, then put the vacuum bag and wipes in a plastic bag, seal it and place it outside, away from children and pets.

If it is a bagless model, empty the contents of the vacuum into a plastic bag and proceed as above. Let the room air out for at least 15 minutes after vacuuming.

Bring the sealed container or bags to a collection site. For further details on clean-up procedures, visit the [Health Canada website](#)

### Some Things to Consider

**With all of these procedures to follow in case of breakage, how safe are they? What will be, or is, the impact if schools, daycares, food service areas, or grocery stores use CFL bulbs and they break?**

**What is going to be the result if a delivery truck carrying these has an accident?**

**How many people are actually going to take their burned out or broken bulbs to a recycling depot? Yes, they have paid an eco-fee when the bulbs were purchased, but there is no refund for returning them, as there is for beverage containers.**

**When fluorescent bulbs are taken apart at the recycling facility, the workers wear Level B or C hazmat attire with respirators, in order to protect themselves. Should we be trading energy savings for potential health problems?**

