

19 January 2013 – More than 140 countries have reached agreement on the first international treaty to reduce the emission and release of mercury into the air, water and land. The Minamata Convention will be signed in October 2013 in Minamata, the Japanese city after which it is named. Minamata suffered critical mercury pollution due to a release of mercury in Minamata Bay from a local chemical factory which killed more than 10 000 people.

Mercury is a naturally occurring element found in air, water and soil. The most common exposure is through eating contaminated fish or shellfish. Exposure can also occur through the air, mercury amalgam dental restorations, spills, incinerators and industrial fuels and improper use or disposal.

Exposure to mercury, mercury compounds (metallic, inorganic, and organic) and mercury added products affects the human neurological system, brain, heart, kidneys, lungs and immune system.

The Minamata Convention, limits the supply of, and trade in, mercury and the use of mercury added products and industrial processes (batteries, compact fluorescent light bulbs and linear fluorescent light bulbs, cosmetics, pesticides, dental amalgam and medical appliances like thermometers). These will be phased out by 2020. It also prohibits primary mining of mercury and use of mercury to be reduced in coal-fired power plants, small and gold mines and cement production.

As part of the new agreement medical staff and health care professionals will be trained to identify and treat mercury-related exposures.

Among other recommendations, WHO will support Member States to:

- promote the development and implementation of strategies and programmes to identify and protect populations at risk of exposure to mercury
- set targets to reduce mercury exposure
- develop science-based educational and preventive programmes on occupational exposure to mercury and mercury compounds
- provide health care services for prevention, treatment and care of populations affected by

exposure to mercury and mercury compounds.

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