

The environmental impact of mercury contamination is well known.

The disasters of mercury poisoning in Minamata Bay and Iraq are two examples.

## Minamata Disease

From 1932 to 1968, Chisso Corporation, a company located in Kumamoto Japan, dumped an estimated 27 tons of mercury compounds into Minamata Bay. Kumamoto is a small town about 570 miles southwest of Tokyo. The town consists of mostly farmers and fisherman. When Chisso Corporation dumped this massive amount of mercury into the bay, thousands of people whose normal diet included fish from the bay, unexpectedly developed symptoms of methyl mercury poisoning. The illness became known as the "Minamata Disease". The mercury poisoning resulted from years of environmental destruction and neglect from Chisso Corporation.

Minamata Disease was also known as 'laughing disease' because those who were worst affected literally laughed themselves to death. Cats who also ate the fish, jumped about stupidly and ran off the pier to drown in the ocean.

"The people of Minamata reported numbness in their limbs and lips. Some had difficulty hearing or seeing. Others developed shaking (tremors) in their arms and legs, difficulty walking, and even brain damage. And, like the cats, some people seemed to be going crazy, shouting uncontrollably. Something was affecting their nervous system.

Finally, in July 1959, researchers from Kumamoto University discovered the source of the illness—high levels of mercury poisoning—which they then named Minamata disease. But how were all of these people (and cats) being poisoned?

Poisoned women gave birth to poisoned babies. These children were born with severe deformities including gnarled limbs, mental retardation, deafness, and blindness.

According to the Japanese government, 2,955 people contracted Minamata disease and 1,784 people have since died." <sup>1</sup>

## Iraq

"In the early 1970's a major methyl mercury-poisoning catastrophe occurred in which an estimated 10,000 people died and 100,000 were severely and permanently brain damaged. Saddam's regime was largely successful in suppressing information about the event.

The problem began in the late 1960's and early 1970's, when Iraq experienced a series of abysmal harvests. Since the "green revolution" was beginning, Iraq imported "wonder wheat" from Mexico. The risk was that the seed might grow moldy during the long, humid ocean transport to Iraq if it was not dressed with some fungicide. Methyl mercury became the most cost-effective fungicide, because it had recently been banned in Scandinavia and several American states due to

environmental and toxicological risks. So the world market was flooded and prices dropped.

The crisis did provide doctors with some greater understanding of how to detect methyl mercury poisoning. "Quiet baby syndrome," for example, when mothers praise their babies for never crying, is now considered a warning sign for methyl mercury-induced brain damage in children."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.verywellhealth.com/minamata-disease-2860856>