



Bioaccumulation

Once released into the environment, mercury eventually ends up in water and settles into sediments. Bacteria in the water converts the inorganic mercury into methylmercury, an organic mercury compound. These bacteria are eaten by plankton and other small creatures, which in turn are eaten by small fish, then larger fish. Mercury does not easily leave the body of an organism, so the amount of mercury builds up in species as they go up the food chain in a process called bioaccumulation. Predatory fish, which sit higher up on the food chain and are long-lived, can accumulate hundreds of thousands to millions of times the concentration of mercury that originally entered the water. As people eat fish with mercury, the mercury is transferred to humans and builds up in the body.