AD EDUXIAN JOURNAL
A Quarterly Multidisciplinary Blind Peer Reviewed & Refereed Online International Journal
Google Scholar Indexing PIF: 1.048(I2OR), 3.125 (IIFS) & 3.8(SJIF)
Vol (3), Issue (2), April-June 2026 *ISSN: 3048-7951*

Chemical Toxicity of Methylmercury and Its Effect on Human Health: Evidence from Japan

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24327967
Review: 05/06/2026 **Acceptance: 18/07/2026** **Publication: 02/08/2026**

Abstract: Methylmercury is one of the most toxic organic forms of mercury and poses a significant threat to human health and the environment. It is primarily formed in aquatic ecosystems through the microbial methylation of inorganic mercury and subsequently accumulates in aquatic organisms. Human exposure mainly occurs through the consumption of contaminated fish and seafood. The present study examines the chemical toxicity of methylmercury, its adverse effects on human health, and the historical evidence provided by the Minamata disease outbreak in Japan. The study highlights the mechanisms of methylmercury toxicity, bioaccumulation, biomagnification, and the neurological disorders associated with exposure. The findings emphasize the need for strict environmental monitoring and effective public health policies to reduce mercury contamination.

Keywords: Methylmercury, Mercury Toxicity, Human Health, Minamata Disease, Bioaccumulation, Biomagnification, Japan, Environmental Pollution.

Introduction

Methylmercury is a highly toxic form of mercury that is widely distributed in aquatic environments. It can easily accumulate in living organisms and undergo bioaccumulation through the food chain. Methylmercury adversely affects both neurological and physiological systems, and its toxicity can be influenced by environmental factors and coexisting pollutants. Human exposure to methylmercury occurs mainly through the consumption of contaminated fish and seafood.

Due to its ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and placenta, methylmercury can cause severe neurological damage, particularly in developing fetuses and young children. Symptoms of methylmercury poisoning include sensory disturbances, impaired vision and hearing, loss of coordination, and cognitive dysfunction. One of the most significant incidents of methylmercury poisoning occurred in Minamata, Japan, during the mid-twentieth century.

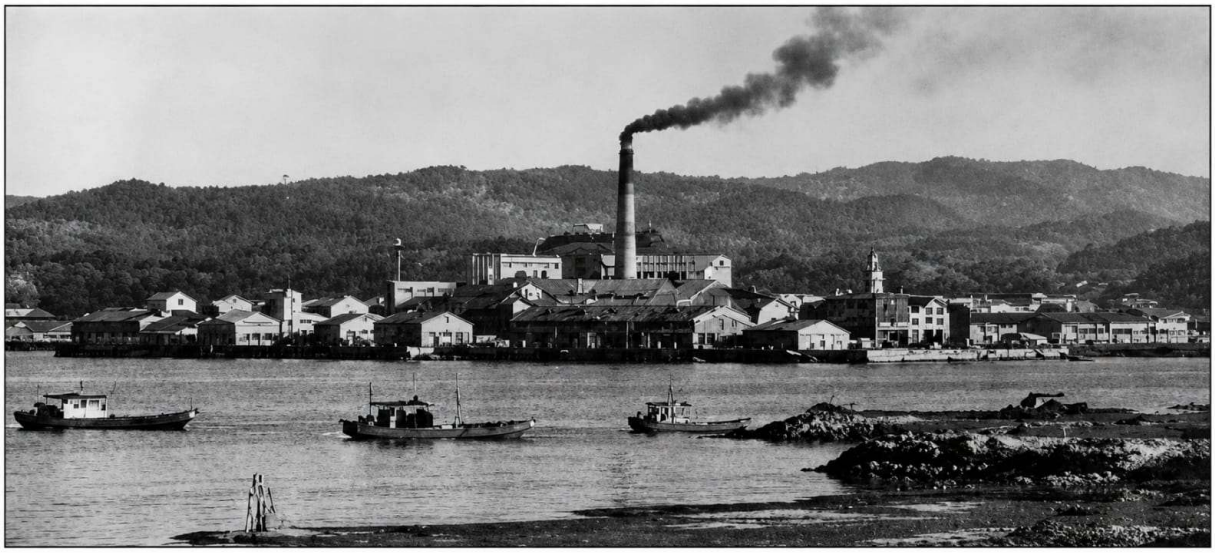
Industrial wastewater discharged from the Chisso Factory contaminated Minamata Bay, leading to the accumulation of methylmercury in aquatic organisms. Consumption of contaminated seafood by local residents resulted in a serious neurological disorder known as Minamata Disease. This incident became a landmark example of the harmful effects of mercury pollution on human health and the environment.

1.1 Minamata Poisoning in Japan: Minamata poisoning, also known as Minamata disease, was one of the most severe cases of environmental pollution-induced health disaster in history. It occurred in Minamata City, Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan, in the mid-twentieth century.The disease was first recognized in 1956 when local residents began suffering from strange neurological symptoms. Later inves tigations revealed that the Chisso Corporation's chemical factory had been discharging mercury-containing wastewater into Minamata Bay for many years.

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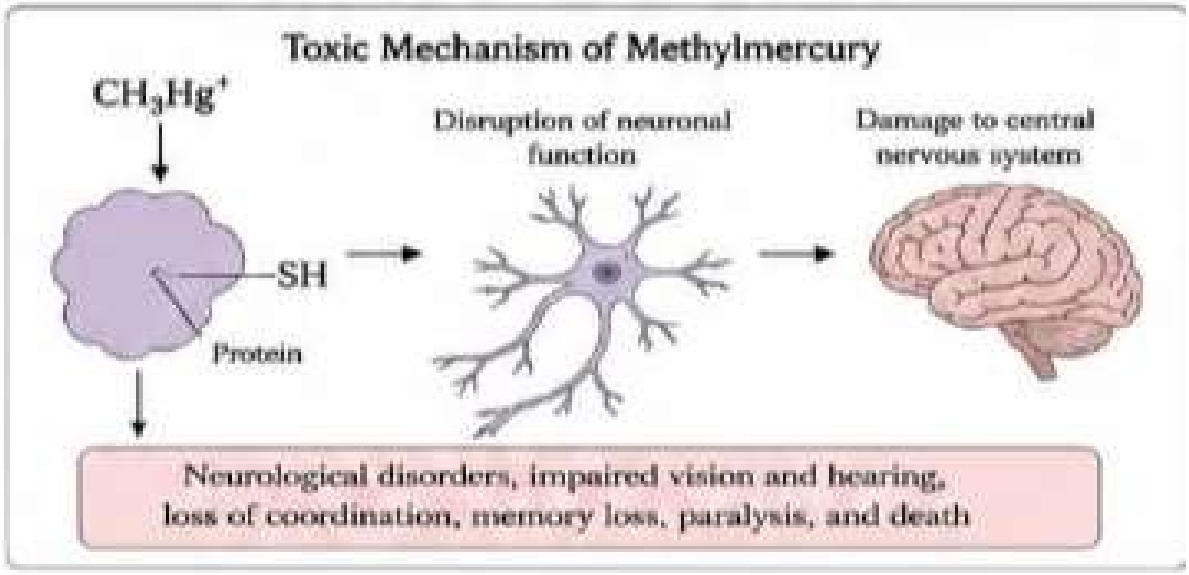
1.2. Location of Minamata Bay and Issue in Japan: Minamata Bay is located in Kumamoto Prefecture, on the south-western coast of Kyushu Island, Japan. The bay is connected to the Minamata River, which received industrial wastewater from the Chisso Factory.The discharged mercury was converted into methylmercury in aquatic sediments by microorganisms. This methylmercury mulated in fish and shellfish, and local people who depended on fishing for their diet were exposed to it, leading to a severe public health crisis.

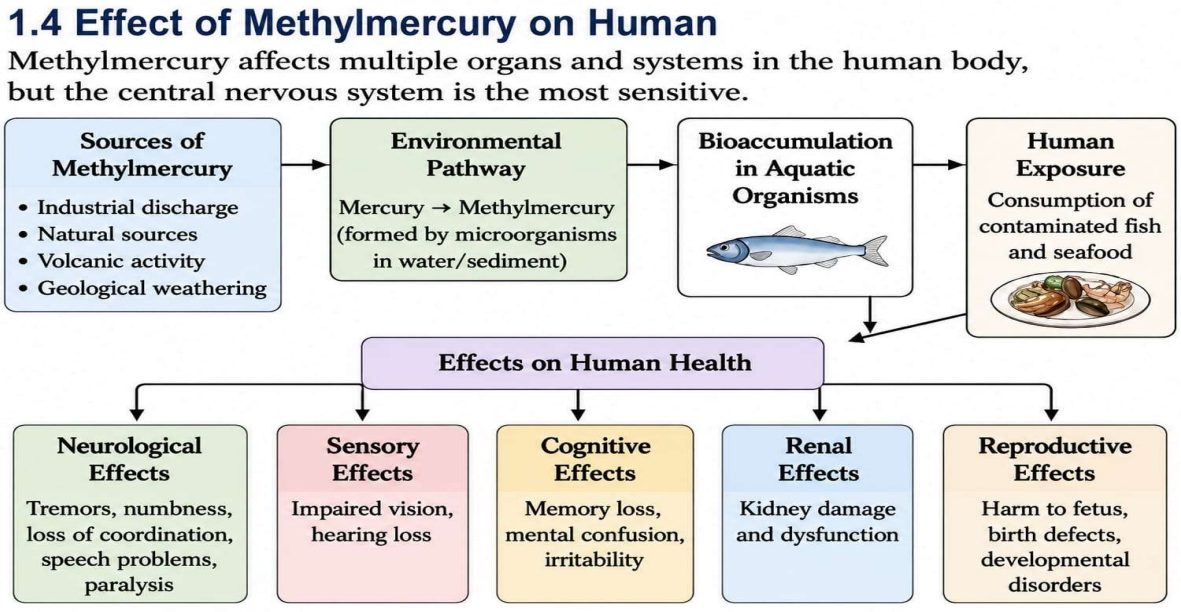


Chisso Factory at Minamata Bay, Japan (Source: Historical photo, Japan)

1.3. Chemical Toxicity of Methylmercury: Methylmercury is highly toxic because of its ability to bind strongly with sulfhydryl (-SH) groups of proteins and enzymes, disrupting their normal functions.It is lipophilic in nature and easily crosses biological membranes including the blood-brain barrier and placenta.It interferes with neuronal

cell function and causes oxidative stress.It inhibits enzyme activity, disrupts cell division, and induces apoptosis (cell death).Long-term exposure leads to severe damage to the central nervous system, kidneys, and other organs





Methylmercury is a highly toxic form of mercury that is widely distributed in aquatic environments. It can easily accumulate in living organisms and undergo bioaccumulation through the food chain. Methylmercury adversely affects both neurological and physiological systems, and its toxicity can be influenced by environmental factors and coexisting pollutants.

Human exposure to methylmercury occurs mainly through the consumption of contaminated fish and seafood. Due to its ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and placenta, methylmercury can cause severe neurological damage, particularly in developing fetuses and young children. One of the most significant incidents of

methylmercury poisoning occurred in Minamata, Japan, where industrial wastewater contaminated aquatic ecosystems and caused widespread health problems.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have reported the toxic effects of methylmercury on human health. Harada (1995) documented the clinical manifestations of Minamata disease and highlighted the neurological consequences of methylmercury exposure. Clarkson and Magos (2006) explained the mechanisms of mercury toxicity and its impact on the central nervous system. Grandjean et al. (2010) reported that prenatal exposure to methylmercury may impair cognitive development in children. Recent studies have also demonstrated that bioaccumulation and biomagnification significantly increase human exposure to methylmercury through seafood consumption.

3. Hypothesis:

- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Methylmercury exposure has no significant effect on human health.
- H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): Methylmercury exposure significantly affects human health and contributes to neurological and physiological disorders.

4. Research Gap

Although numerous studies have investigated mercury toxicity, limited attention has been given to integrating chemical toxicity mechanisms with historical evidence from Japan. Furthermore, there is a need for a comprehensive review linking environmental contamination, bioaccumulation, and long-term human health impacts. This study attempts to bridge this gap by combining toxicological and historical perspectives.

5. Methodology

This study is based on a secondary data analysis and literature review approach. Relevant information was collected from published research articles, scientific journals, books, government reports, and international health organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The study focuses on the chemical toxicity of methylmercury and its effects on human health, with special emphasis on the Minamata disease outbreak in Japan.

5.1 Data Collection: Analysis of reports published by WHO, UNEP, and environmental agencies Collection of data from peer-reviewed journals and research papers.Review of historical records related to Minamata disease in Japan.Examination of case studies involving methylmercury poisoning.

5.2 Study Area: The study primarily focuses on Minamata Bay, Japan, where industrial discharge of mercury-contaminated wastewater led to severe environmental pollution and human health consequences.

5.3 Data Analysis:

- Comparative analysis of findings from different studies.
- Evaluation of the relationship between methylmercury exposure and health effects.
- Assessment of neurological, developmental, reproductive, and renal toxicity associated with methylmercury.

- Interpretation of evidence from epidemiological and toxicological studies.

5.4. Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies related to methylmercury toxicity.
- Research published in recognized scientific journals.
- Reports focusing on human health impacts and Minamata disease.
- English-language publications from reliable sources.

5.5 Exclusion Criteria

- Studies not directly related to methylmercury.
- Non-scientific articles and unverified reports.
- Research with insufficient data on human health effects.

5.6 Ethical Considerations: This research uses only published secondary data and does not involve direct participation of human subjects. Therefore, no ethical approval was required.The present study is based on a qualitative review of secondary data collected from scientific journals, books, government reports, and published research articles related to methylmercury toxicity and Minamata disease. Relevant literature was analyzed to evaluate the chemical properties of methylmercury, its environmental behavior, and its effects on human health.

6. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that methylmercury is highly toxic due to its ability to bind with sulfhydryl groups in proteins and accumulate in biological tissues. The compound readily crosses the blood-brain barrier, causing damage to the central nervous system.The Minamata incident in Japan demonstrated the severe consequences of industrial mercury pollution. Consumption of contaminated fish and shellfish resulted in symptoms such as and shellfish resulted in symptoms such as numbness, muscle weakness, impaired vision, hearing loss, cognitive dysfunction, paralysis, and death in severe cases.The study also found that bioaccumulation and biomagnification play crucial roles in increasing methylmercury concentrations at higher trophic levels, thereby enhancing human exposure through seafood consumption.

7. Conclusion

Methylmercury is a highly hazardous environmental contaminant with serious implications for human health. The Minamata disease outbreak in Japan serves as a significant example of the devastating effects of mercury pollution. The findings indicate that methylmercury exposure can lead to severe neurological and physiological disorders, particularly among vulnerable populations such as pregnant women and children. Effective environmental regulations, continuous monitoring, and public awareness are essential to minimize mercury contamination and protect public health.

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