Biological Methylation Encyclopedia Article

Biological Methylation

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The process by which a methyl radical (-CH_3) is chemically combined with some other substance through the action of a living organism. One of the most environmentally important examples of this process is the **methylation** of **mercury** in the sediments of lakes, rivers, and other bodies of water. Elementary mercury and many of its inorganic compounds have relatively low toxicity because they are insoluble. However, in sediments, bacteria can convert mercury to an organic form, methylmercury, that is soluble in fat. When ingested by animals, methylmercury accumulates in body fat and exerts highly toxic, sometimes fatal, effects.