

# What Do Homeowners Need to Know about Petroleum Spills and Flooding?

If your home has been affected by a flood that caused an oil spill or any type of petroleum release in or near your home, you should contact the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Spill Hotline immediately at **1-800-457-7362** to report the spill. If oil is mixed with the water that has flooded your home DO NOT pump the oily water out into your yard. Contact the NYSDEC Spill Hotline, **1-800-457-7362**, to request assistance with pumping oily water out of your home. The oil may spread and contaminate other areas including nearby wells, water bodies and homes. Oil spills usually cause strong odors and can contaminate indoor air. You should not stay in a building with strong oil odors, since inhaling oil vapors may cause health effects. The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) is providing this information to help with this problem. If you have questions, call **518-402-7810** or the toll-free number at **1-800-458-1158**. After 5 PM and weekends call **1-866-881-2809**.

## Oil and Water in Your Home

If pools of oil are floating on the water in your home, you may be able to absorb or encircle the oil with absorbent pads. You can purchase absorbent pads from auto or marine supply stores, or you may use cloth diapers or pads from medical supply stores or pharmacies. Absorbent pads can minimize the spread of oil on walls and floors and can limit other damage to your property by absorbing the oil. For small pools of oil floating on water, absorbent pads may be sufficient to collect most of the oil. For a thicker or continuous layer of oil, a vacuum truck may be necessary to skim the oil off the water. As mentioned above, do not pump oily water into your yard. Contact the NYSDEC to coordinate the removal of oily water from your home.

## Controlling Odors

If the oil is only in the basement or crawlspace, close all doors, laundry chutes, etc. into the living space. Stairways and passages between the oil and the living space that do not have a closable door should be partitioned off with a sheet of plastic. Avoid tracking oil inside the home. Do not wear any shoes in the living space that may have been contaminated with oil.

Fans can help to control odors. The DIRECTION of fan air flow is critical to keeping odors out of the living space. Place one stationary fan to EXHAUST CONTAMINATED AREAS BY BLOWING AIR OUT through a single window, with no other nearby windows open. Any windows near the exhaust air should be kept closed to prevent contaminated air from re-entering the home. If the only opening to the outdoors is a walkout basement door, then a large fan should be placed in the doorway, blowing the odors to the outside. If possible, block or reduce the open space around fans (shroud) to increase the fan's effectiveness. Place a second fan BLOWING OUTDOOR (FRESH) AIR INTO THE LIVING SPACE which will reduce your exposure to odors. Use caution when operating central heating or central air conditioning systems as these could spread the odors and possibly contaminate the ventilation system.

## Oil Coated Belongings, Debris and Building Materials

Some oil-coated materials can be difficult to clean. Hard-surfaces such as glass or metal can be cleaned with soap, detergent, non-solvent degreaser or other cleaners. Avoid cleaning with solvents such as acetone, xylenes or turpentine, which may be flammable and hazardous to your health. Porous materials such as wood, boxes, fabrics, sheetrock or insulation will most likely need to be discarded. Remove contaminated items and materials to the outside of the home. Stockpile contaminated materials on plastic and cover with plastic until they have been documented for insurance claims, after which they may be disposed in the regular trash. Use cat litter, sawdust or other absorbent powders such as bentonite or zeolite to absorb any remaining oil on floors and solid surfaces. Absorbent powders may be purchased from automotive or marine supply stores, pet stores, pharmacies and home improvement stores. Check with a professional cleaning company for information on cleaning or deodorizing household furnishings.

When performing any cleanup work you should take steps to minimize exposure. For example, wear clothing that will help reduce skin exposure such as long pants, long sleeve shirts and gloves (rubber if available). Work in areas that are well-ventilated as described above.

Individuals with questions regarding the disposal of flood-related petroleum contaminated debris or household hazardous waste from homes can call DEC at **518-402-8678**. Calls concerning Non-Residential wastes should be directed to DEC at **518-402-8792**. DEC will provide information to assist in finding a nearby disposal site or to determine if there will be a waste pickup scheduled for their area.

### **Furnaces and Boilers**

Oil-fired furnaces or boilers should not be started until they have been checked by a service technician. Furnaces and boilers generate exhaust gases including carbon monoxide which can be deadly and must be vented. If a furnace or boiler or their exhaust ducts are damaged, deadly gases may be released inside your home. Be sure all flue vents are clear so gases exhaust freely. Be sure all tank vents are clear. When fans are being used, the potential for back drafting should be evaluated.

### **Drinking Water Wells**

Drinking water from wells contaminated by petroleum will often have an odor. If you think this is the case, do not drink the water and notify the NYSDEC and/or NYSDOH.

### **Potential Health Effects**

Most of the information on the health effects of petroleum products in humans is based on inhalation exposure to petroleum product vapors. Exposure to high levels of petroleum products can cause health effects, primarily on the nervous and respiratory systems. People who inhaled elevated air levels of fuel oil vapors for short periods of time had nausea, increased blood pressure, eye irritation, headaches, light-headedness, and poor coordination. Longer term exposure to elevated levels of fuel oil vapors can cause similar effects on the nervous and respiratory systems and may also affect the blood, liver and kidneys. Petroleum products in contact with the skin may cause irritation and blistering in some people. The elderly, the very young, and people with respiratory diseases may be especially sensitive to the effects of inhaling petroleum vapors. Long-term exposure to petroleum product vapors should be minimized to the extent practical. If petroleum odors are present, measures to reduce long-term exposures should be considered. If you are experiencing health effects you should contact your physician or seek medical help.

### **Temporary Relocation**

If strong odors are present in the living space of the home, you may want to limit time spent in the home or consider temporary relocation until indoor air quality improves. Strength of the odors, health status and age of occupants (e.g., people with respiratory or cardiovascular disease, pregnant women, young children and the elderly may be at greater risk) are factors to consider when deciding whether to relocate. Options for temporary relocation for you and your family are relatives, friends or a nearby shelter. If these options are not available, you should contact the NYSDOH for help in relocating. Although New York law stipulates that oil tank owners and operators may be legally responsible for costs associated with oil spill cleanups, including relocation costs, State officials are exploring all other avenues to pay for such costs, including FEMA, the federal Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and insurance. Your health and safety and that of your family are the foremost priority.

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