

Home Heating Oil Spills

Fuel oil is a hazardous substance. Respond immediately to fuel oil spills.

Clean up small drips and spills by following the instructions in this fact sheet.

For spills involving more than one gallon of fuel oil, hire a cleanup company specializing in hazardous materials and spill response.

How home fuel oil spills occur

There are two types of home fuel oil spills, small and large. Small spills happen when a few drops of fuel oil drip out of the tank or pipes. Large home fuel oil spills can occur when basement storage tanks are overfilled, an attempt is made to fill a tank that has been removed, a tank has overturned in a flooded basement, or fuel oil is accidentally put into a septic tank vent or well casing. All large spills will require some amount of professional help to clean up.

The basics of cleaning up a basement fuel oil spill

For Any Size Spill:

Always respond immediately to fuel oil spills, no matter how small. The successful clean up of spilled fuel oil depends on a quick response. Fuel oil that has soaked into concrete floors and wood support beams, or has had time to flow into cracks or drains and get beneath floors and walls will be more difficult to clean up. Sometimes demolition and removal is the only option when walls and floors are saturated with fuel oil. If fuel oil left the house through cracks in the floors, drain tile systems, sump pumps etc. an environmental investigation may be needed that includes collecting soil and groundwater samples and cleanup of contaminated soil and/or groundwater.

It is important to use proper clean up methods.

Prevent an explosion or fire

- Turn off all flame and spark sources. Don't smoke or light matches in the area. Extinguish pilot lights on furnaces, water heaters, and gas dryers. Turn off gas appliances that have electronic ignitions. Do not attempt to clean up spilled oil with a shop vac or use any electric appliances or power tools. Keep all sources of ignition away from the area until the spill is completely cleaned up.

Open windows to control odors

- Open basement windows to ventilate the area. Close all basement cold air returns and heat registers, including the basement door. Close other openings that may allow vapors to enter the upper floors of your home. If your basement has been found not to be in danger of exploding from the fuel oil vapors, you can also ventilate the area with electric fans.

For Small Spills:

Small spills (anything less than a gallon) can often be cleaned up successfully by the homeowner. Call a professional cleaning service if you need help with the clean up, or if the fuel oil odors remain.

Prevent exposure

- When cleaning up a small fuel oil spill, wear rubber gloves and old shoes or boots that can be thrown away. Ventilate the area as much as possible during the clean up. Wash exposed skin with soap and warm water.

Clean up the spill

- Spread an absorbent material, like cat litter or sawdust, over the spill. Shovel the absorbed oil into heavy-duty plastic bags. Keep the bags outside until they can be picked up for disposal.
- Anything porous that came into contact with the spilled oil should be removed and properly disposed of if can not be cleaned. Examples are wood and drywall walls, carpeting and other flooring, clothing, furniture etc.
- Use soap and hot water to clean the floor, walls, appliances and other hard surfaces. Check under appliances, such as the washer and dryer, to be sure all of the oily residue is removed. Repeated cleanings may be necessary.

For Large Spills (one gallon or more):

Report the spill

- If an oil delivery company was involved, call them immediately to report the spill. If the oil delivery company caused the spill, they can be asked to take care of the clean up.
- Report the spill to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) 24-hour hotline, 1-800-943-003.
- Contact your local fire department to determine if there is an explosion hazard. They may also be able to provide fans to ventilate the area.
- You may also wish to contact your local health department and home insurance agent.

Prevent exposure

- It is best to avoid breathing the fuel oil fumes and minimize skin contact. Fuel oil contains many substances which vary in their toxicity. Short term exposure may cause headaches, nausea and dizziness, prolonged exposure can cause serious health problems.
- Consider staying at a motel or with relatives until the clean up is complete. Moving out of your home for a day or two may be a good idea, especially if there are young children, elderly, or medically compromised people in the home.

Contact a cleanup company about cleaning up the oil

- Call a professional cleaning service. Your local health department or DNR office may be able to give you a list of professional cleaning services in your area.

- If fuel oil has escaped the building as noted above, an environmental consultant may be needed. They may collect soil and groundwater samples to define the extent of contamination resulting from the fuel oil that left the building, and to determine an appropriate cleanup strategy.

What to expect after the clean up

The clean up of a fuel oil spill is not complete until odors are gone. If fuel oil spills are promptly and completely cleaned, residual odors should go away after several days. Persistent odors indicate a continued source such as saturated cinder blocks, contaminated soils, wood and drywall, sumps, or floor drains that need additional clean up.

The use of chemical air fresheners is not recommended. These products merely mask the fuel odor by adding other volatile chemicals to an already complex mixture. Their use may increase symptoms in sensitive individuals.

Health concerns associated with fuel oil spills

Brief exposure to fuel oil will not usually cause long-term harm. However, breathing fuel oil vapors in an enclosed space like a basement can cause some short term symptoms. At high concentrations (like those in large spill situations), symptoms can include nausea, dizziness, and eye, nose, or throat irritation. Getting fuel oil on the skin can cause skin irritation. Some individuals may be more sensitive to these effects than others. Even at low concentrations, the strong odor of fuel oil can still make many people feel ill. Getting to fresh air will usually relieve these symptoms.

Very long-term exposure to fuel oil odors in the home (exposure for many years) has the potential for more serious health problems. These include liver and kidney damage, increased blood pressure, other blood problems, and cancer. **A simple “rule of thumb” is if you can smell fuel oil, there is an exposure risk.**

See a doctor if you have symptoms that don't improve when you are away from the fuel oil vapors.

Who to call for help?

- Call your oil delivery company. They may be able to help with the clean up.
- The DNR 24-hour hotline for reporting spills is 1-800-943-0003.
- Call your local fire department if you feel there is a fire or explosion hazard.
- Call your local health department or family physician for health related questions.
- Call your homeowner's insurance representative. Your policy may provide financial assistance for clean up or temporary housing expenses.
- Visit the department's website, <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/eh/>