



Frequently Asked Questions

What is in the oil that could be harmful?

The oil spill may contain two types of oil: diesel fuel and crude oil. Crude oil likely makes up the largest part of the spill because it would have come from the well about 5000 feet below the surface.

Both diesel and crude oil are mixtures of different hydrogen and carbon based chemicals normally called hydrocarbons. Because they are mixtures, different oils can be harmful in different ways.

Diesel is harder to burn than everyday gasoline and lasts longer in the environment when it is spilled. The diesel, if released from the drilling rig, enters the air slowly and can be detected by smell even when only small amounts of diesel are in the air.

The crude oil involved in this oil spill is what is called medium sweet crude.

The “sweet” means it contains less sulfur compounds, which means it is less toxic. Medium crude usually contains fewer chemicals that enter the air as easily as some other oil types. Medium crude also tends to contain fewer chemicals that pose a threat over long periods of time in contrast to other oil types.

Based on data from oil recovered from other wells in this area, we expect that the more hazardous substances found in crude oil, benzene and sulfides, will make up less than 1% of this oil spill.

What is in the Air?

Over time, many of the compounds that make up these oil mixtures will enter the air. The wind will then spread out these vapors over a distance, lowering their concentration in any one area.

When these vapors reach the coast, you will probably be able to smell them. Based on what we know about these chemicals and our previous experiences with oil spills, we expect the level of vapors in the air will be below the level that can hurt you. Tests of the air can tell us more.

Strong smells affect different people in different ways. Some people may experience nausea, vomiting, or headaches. Leaving the area affected by the smell should help to stop your symptoms, if the smell is causing them. If you have to be outside, a respirator with an odor control feature may provide some relief from the smell. Based on what we know now, you do not need to use a respirator for your safety, but using one may make you more comfortable. Most hardware stores stock NIOSH certified N95 respirators with odor control or charcoal filter layers; check the label to make sure the mask is an N95 respirator with odor control or an N95 with a charcoal layer. Follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully to be sure you are using the mask properly.

For now, if the smell bothers you, stay indoors, close the doors and windows, and turn on your central air conditioning. If you have a window air conditioner, instead of a central unit, it may be better not to use the air conditioner or to turn the settings to the recirculating mode, which closes the outside ventilation feature.

What will be coming ashore with the Oil?

It will take time for the oil to reach the shore. During this time, we are working to break up the oil using other chemicals, so that less of it makes it to shore. This oil is usually a greater hazard for wildlife than humans. You will hear more about the harm for wildlife as the cleanup continues.

Any chemicals from the oil that do reach the shore may still have an odor and look a bit like asphalt or road tar. It is important to stay away from any oil that reaches shore because coming into close contact with the oil for long periods of time can be hazardous. Avoid touching any of the oil you find.

If some of the oil gets on your bare skin, wash it off as soon as you can. If you develop a rash, see your doctor or other health care provider. Tell them how you came to touch the oil, and then have your provider contact the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.

Can the oil harm my children?

Children tend to be more sensitive than adults to oil and other forms of pollution. What might be annoying to you could be a real problem for them, particularly if your child is an infant or toddler, or has a pre-existing condition.

Like adults, children should avoid contact with the oil. If some of the oil gets on your children's bare skin, wash it off as soon as you can. Watch your children carefully for rashes or dark, sticky spots on their skin that are hard to wash off. If you see any of these symptoms, see your doctor or other health care provider.

Where can I get more Information?

For more information about the spill and the progress of the cleanup, go to www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com.

For more information about potential hazards associated with oil and petroleum products, go to <http://emergency.cdc.gov/gulfoilspill2010/>.

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1600 Clifton Rd. Atlanta, GA 30333, USA
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) TTY: (888) 232-6348, 24 Hours/Every Day -
cdcinfo@cdc.gov

