

Managing Fuel Oil Spills: Home Cleanup

by Dawn Errede and David Crisman

Fuel oil spills typically occur in the fall at the start of the heating season, when oil deliverers are likely to be new and unfamiliar with the homes they are serving. Homeowner changes could also lead to confusion at oil-delivery time. The spills typically happen in the basements of homes from overfilled tanks or through fill pipes that have no tanks attached! Other spills have occurred when oil was mistakenly dumped into septic tank vents or drinking water wells.

Cleanup costs will be paid by whoever is responsible for the spill. If lawyers are involved in determining responsibility, costs will be even higher. Therefore, it is particularly important that you do what you can to prevent spills from happening:

- ♦ If you remove your fuel oil tank, be sure to also remove the fill pipe. Call your oil company to cancel any future deliveries.
- ♦ Do not put an oil cap, or anything that looks like an oil cap, on septic tank vents, drinking water wells, etc.
- ♦ Keep tank caps tightly sealed except when filling or emptying the tank.

If a spill occurs inside the home, first:

Keep flames and other sources of ignition away from the spill (shut off furnace, unplug any sparking mechanisms).

Shut down the furnace fan to minimize distribution of odors throughout the house, and isolate the spill area as much as possible (close the doors to other rooms).

Open windows to vent the smell (curtains, furniture, clothes, etc. will absorb the smell and may be hard to deodorize).

Don't track oil into carpets or other clean parts of the house, and try to contain the spill as much as possible (prevent contact with porous surfaces, concrete block and floor included).

Wearing rubber gloves and overshoes, use generous quantities of absorbent materials like kitty litter or powdered laundry detergent to darn up and absorb the oil. Start on the outer perimeter, surround the spill and work inwards, scooping oil-soaked material into buckets as it becomes saturated. For large spills, place soaked material in doubled garbage bags. Seal the inner bag tightly and separately from the outer garbage bag.

Cover any stains on concrete floors with detergent also, as this will help neutralize the odor and break down the oil stain.

Spills that affect the environment outside the home (spilled directly on the ground, or pumped accidentally into a septic tank or well) will require the services of an environmental consultant (see "What to expect during cleanup").

Next:

- ♦ **Call** the oil delivery company and report the spill. Ask for their help.
- ♦ **Ask** them to bring oil-dry absorbents and equipment to help contain and clean up the spill.
- ♦ **Ask** the oil company to inform their insurance company of the spill.
- ♦ **Contact** your property insurance company and ask for assistance with the claim against the oil company's insurance.

If the oil delivery company refuses to help, note the date and time of the call. Relay this information to your property insurance company.

What to expect during cleanup:

The oil company will help contain, pick up, or pump out the spilled oil.

The oil company's insurance company may arrange for cleaning of any affected carpets, curtains, furniture, and/or clothing.

The oil company's insurance company will hire an environmental consultant.

The consultant will evaluate the extent of the spill and determine whether soil or ground water has been impacted. The consultant may collect soil and/or ground water samples for analysis, and coordinate clean up with subcontractors.

Depending on the extent of the spill, cleanup may include some or all of the following: Steam cleaning and sealing the concrete, removal of the concrete slab and/or some of the block, removal of contaminated soils beneath the slab, installation of soil venting system, installation of a ground water pump and treat system, or (worst case) purchase of your home by the insurance company.

Be cooperative with the environmental contractors (they are there to help).

Protect your legal interests:

Photograph conditions before, during and after the cleanup.

Make written notes of anything anyone has to say (regarding cause of problem, etc.).

Don't accept or sign anything agreeing that cleanup is complete or satisfactory. An environmental regulatory agency will make this determination.

If you haven't already done so, contact your property insurance company and ask for assistance with the claim against the oil company's insurance.

If you leave the home overnight, save all receipts for hotels, meals, etc. Careful record keeping will speed up claim processing.

Environmental obligations:

Spills must be reported promptly to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) (no spill is too small). The MPCA can provide lists of environmental consultants and cleanup contractors that deal with such spills.

Outstate, call 1-800-422-0798. In the Metro area

call 612-649-5451. These calls are answered 24 hours a day, and go to a Minnesota Duty Officer with the Department of Public Safety, in the Division of Emergency Management, a position paid for by the MPCA.

Be safe and protect your health:

Fuel oil is combustible. Until the spill is completely remediated, keep all sources of ignition away from the area.

The health effects of exposure to fuel oil are not well documented. Lighter petroleum products (such as gasoline) contain more volatile compounds such as benzene that is known to be toxic. Heavier petroleum products (such as fuel oil) have much less of the volatile compounds, but may have more sulfur-containing compounds, which give fuel oil some of its characteristic smell. The smell can give people headaches and cause them to feel nauseous.

If you feel ill, it's probably wise to go to a motel for a night or two (or more, if necessary). Moving out temporarily may be a good idea, especially if there are young children, elderly or infirm people in the home. Keep all receipts!

This information was compiled from the authors' knowledge and experience of petroleum spills. Every spill presents its own specific issues and problems that must be addressed by an environmental or legal professional. Therefore, this information is general, and based on current environmental practices at this time. No warranty is implied or intended.

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