



## Emergency Preparedness and Response

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# What to Expect from the Oil Spill and How to Protect Your Health

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People can be exposed to hazardous substances related to the spill by breathing them (air), by swallowing them (food, water), or by touching them (skin). People should avoid close contact to the spill and fumes from any burning oil.

### Air Quality:

- **Smell:** People may be able to smell the oil spill from the shore. The odor comes from chemicals in the oil that people can smell at levels well below those that would make most people sick. However, exposure to low levels of these chemicals may cause irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and skin. People with asthma or other lung diseases may be more sensitive to these effects.
- **Burning oil:** When responders burn some of the oil, some “Particulate Matter” (PM) may reach the shore. PM is a mix of very small particles and liquid droplets found in the air. PM may pose a greater risk for people who have a chronic condition such as asthma or heart disease.

**If you smell gas or see smoke or know that fires are nearby, stay indoors, set your air conditioner to reuse indoor air, and avoid physical activities that put extra demands on your lungs and heart.**

### Food:

The [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) and [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) are monitoring the oil spill and its potential impact on the safety of seafood harvested from the area. Although crude oil has the potential to taint seafood with flavors and odors caused by exposure to hydrocarbon chemicals, the public should not be concerned about the safety of seafood in the stores at this time. For more information about seafood and the oil spill, visit <http://www.fda.gov/Food/ucm210436.htm>.

### Water:

Drinking water and household water are not expected to be affected by the spill. However, water used for recreation may be affected. Swimming in water contaminated with chemicals from the oil spill could cause health effects. For more information about water and the oil spill, visit [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/oil\\_spill/information\\_residents.htm#5](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/oil_spill/information_residents.htm#5).

**Follow local and state public health guidelines and warnings about the use of beaches and coastal water for swimming, boating, and fishing. For more information about beach safety, visit <http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com/go/doc/2931/542551/>.**

### Dispersants:

Oil spill dispersants break an oil slick into small drops. For most people, brief contact with a small amount of oil spill dispersants will do no harm. However, longer contact can cause a rash and dry skin. Dispersants can also irritate your eyes. Breathing or swallowing dispersants can also cause health effects.

**If you are concerned that you have been exposed to oil or dispersants, see your doctor. Health care providers can find more information on CDC’s oil spill web site at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/gulfoilspill2010>.**

- **Content source:** National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH)/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), Office of Noncommunicable Diseases, Injury and Environmental Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCDPHP), National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (NCBDDD)

