



Emergency Preparedness and Response

Gulf Oil Spill Information for Pregnant Women

I'm pregnant. Can the oil harm me or my unborn baby?

Although the oil may contain some chemicals that could cause harm to an unborn baby under some conditions, the CDC has reviewed sampling data from the EPA and feels that the levels of these chemicals are well below the level that could generally cause harm to pregnant women or their unborn babies. The effects that chemicals might have on a pregnant woman and her unborn baby would depend on many things: how the mother came into contact with the oil, how long she was in contact with it, how often she came into contact with it, and the overall health of the mother and her baby.

People, including pregnant women, can be exposed to these chemicals by breathing them (air), by swallowing them (water, food), or by touching them (skin). If possible, everyone, including pregnant women, should avoid the oil and spill-affected areas. Generally, a pregnant woman will see or smell the chemicals in oil before those chemicals can hurt her or the baby. The EPA and CDC are working together to continue monitoring the levels of oil in the environment. If we begin to find levels that are more likely to be harmful, we will tell the public. For up-to-date information on monitoring data along the Gulf Coast, please visit [EPA's website](#).

What can I do to protect myself and my unborn baby?

- If you live along the coast, avoid areas where there are reports of oil reaching the shore.
- If the smell bothers you or you see smoke, stay indoors, set your air conditioner to reuse indoor air, and avoid physical activities that put extra demand on your lungs and heart.
- If you find any oil, avoid touching it, as well as oil spill-affected water and sand.
- If some of the oil gets on your skin, wash it off as soon as you can with soap and water.
- If you begin to feel sick after coming into contact with the oil or spill-affected areas, contact your doctor or other health professional.
- Follow local and state public health guidelines and warnings related to the oil spill (see links to resources below).

Can the air make me sick?

Although the oil vapors may contain some things that could be harmful to pregnant women, the CDC has reviewed sampling data from the EPA and feels that the levels of these chemicals are well below the level that could generally cause harm to pregnant women or their unborn babies. EPA is testing the air daily and sending the samples to laboratories for further analysis. CDC is working with EPA to decide if there are any chemicals at harmful levels. In addition, EPA scientists are taking [or checking] air samples every hour so that people can be warned if the levels go up. Visit the [EPA's website](#) for the most up-to-date information on air monitoring results.

Smell

Pregnant women may be affected by the strong smell. It can give you a headache or upset stomach, so you may want to stay indoors, set your air conditioner to reuse indoor air, and avoid physical activities that put extra demand on your lungs and heart. If your symptoms do not improve after moving indoors, contact your health care professional, especially if you have asthma or other lung problems.

If you have to be outside, a N95 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 N95 respirator for your safety, but using one may make you more comfortable. Most hardware stores stock respirators (you should check the label to make sure the mask is a NIOSH certified N95 respirator with odor control or a charcoal layer). Follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully to be sure you are using the mask properly.

Burning oil

Burning the oil in the Gulf of Mexico is one method being used to ensure that no oil make it to shore and/or to potentially harm people, animals or the environment. As responders burn some of the oil, some "Particulate Matter" (PM) may be created. PM is a mix of very small particles and liquid droplets found in the air. PM varies in size and the smallest PM can get deep into your lungs. PM should not reach the shore because the fires are far offshore. When crews burn the spilled oil they carefully watch the weather, wind, and water conditions and monitor the air. They stop the burn right away if there is any problem. CDC and ATSDR are helping the Coast Guard, EPA, and our other partners to protect the public's health. Visit this [CDC website](#) for up-to-date information about burning oil and public health.

If you smell or see smoke you can take the following steps to protect yourself:

- Leave the area if you are at greater risk from breathing smoke. If you have a chronic respiratory condition such as asthma or cardiovascular disease, you may be at greater risk. Talk to your doctor about ways to avoid this risk.
- Limit your exposure to smoke: stay inside and use your air conditioner set to a recirculation mode. If you do not have an air conditioner you may wish to leave the area until the smoke is completely gone.
- Avoid activities that put extra demands on your lungs and heart. These include exercising or physical chores, both outdoors and indoors.
- Dust masks, bandanas, or other cloths (even if wet) will not protect you from smoke.

Is the water safe?

Drinking water is not expected to be affected by the spill. If you have any concerns about your water, contact your water utility company.

Swimming in water affected by the oil spill will be unpleasant and could cause harm. For now, pregnant women should avoid zones where there are reports of oil reaching the shore. It is important to stay away from any oil that reaches the shore because coming into close contact with the oil for long periods of time could cause harm. Avoid touching any of the oil you find, as well as oil-stained water and sand. If some of the oil gets on your skin, wash it off as soon as you can with soap and water. If you notice rashes or dark sticky spots on your skin even after you've washed the area of skin that came in contact with the oil, consult your doctor or other health care professional.

CDC recommends that people follow local and state public health guidelines and warnings related to the use of beaches and coastal water for recreational activities and fishing. The EPA is collecting samples of water along the coast to estimate the effects on fish, wildlife, and human health. Visit the [EPA's website](#) for the most up-to-date information on water sampling results.

Is it safe for me to eat fish or seafood from the Gulf of Mexico?

As a precaution, fishing areas affected by the spill are closed to fishing and oyster collection, for both personal and commercial use. Any seafood available in stores comes from non-closed waters. Seafood that is unsafe will not be allowed in stores.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service are monitoring the oil spill and will notify the public if any problem is found with seafood from unclosed fishing areas in this area of the country. If harmful levels of chemicals are found in Gulf-area seafood, CDC will work quickly with other federal agencies such as FDA and state agencies to make sure the public is informed.

For some general guidelines about eating seafood during pregnancy, please visit this FDA [website](#).

What are oil dispersants and are they harmful to me?

Oil spill dispersants are applied to break an oil slick into small droplets and prevent the oil from coming back together. It is unlikely that coastal residents will come into contact with undiluted dispersants, which are used out in the Gulf. It is possible that diluted dispersants could reach the coast in the air or the water. EPA is monitoring the air and water along the shore for dispersants and has not detected any at levels that could be a threat to you or your child.

Some of the chemicals in the dispersants can cause harm to people under some conditions, which is why the use of dispersants is carefully controlled and monitored. Pregnant women should avoid contact with dispersants or any other potentially harmful chemical, if possible. For most people, brief contact with a small amount of oil spill dispersants will do no harm. However, longer contact can cause a rash, dry skin, and eye irritation. In the unlikely event of breathing them in or swallowing them, other health effects, such as nausea, vomiting, and throat and lung irritation are possible. If you are concerned that you have been exposed to oil spill dispersants, contact your doctor or other health care professional. For more information on oil dispersants, please visit this CDC [website](#).

State Resources

- [Alabama](#) - Alabama Department of Public Health recommendations
- [Florida](#) - Florida Gulf Oil Spill page
- [Louisiana](#) - Latest news from Louisiana about Gulf Oil spill
- [Mississippi](#) - State Department of Health Gulf Oil Spill information
- [Texas](#) - News updates from Texas Department of State Health Services

Federal Resources

- [Unified Federal Oil Spill Response](#) - Find the latest incident updates, information on plans for specific areas, and information on how to volunteer to help. The Joint Information Center, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the Department of Homeland Security, coordinates this website and all information from federal and private partners involved in responding to the oil spill.

- Disaster Information Management Research Center - The National Library of Medicine's information on oil spills and health.
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) - Contains answers to questions about how EPA is responding to environmental concerns in the air and water related to the oil spill.
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA) - FDA is monitoring the situation and its potential impact on the safety of seafood harvested from the area.
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) - The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service is responsible for the management, conservation and protection of living marine resources in water 3 to 200 miles offshore. NOAA will continue to monitor the situation and notify the public if any problem is detected with seafood from this area of the country.
- National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) - The National Institute of Environmental Health Science (NIEHS) has summarized many of the hazards and protections needed for workers involved in oil spill response and cleanup in the Oil Spill Safety Awareness Tool.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) - CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is working to provide recommendations to workers about chemical exposures, physical hazards and biological hazards they may encounter.