

health impact of the exposure to leaking oil

Residents of the Gulf Coast region are rightfully concerned about the impact of the recent oil spill on the economy and the marine life but little attention has been devoted to its potential impact on the health of the citizens. What are the potential health hazards of the oil spill and what do you need to know if you are exposed to the oil?

Crude oil contains dangerous chemicals, including benzene, which is a known carcinogen, and others that are toxic to the central nervous system, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. Most health experts agree that brief contact with crude oil is not considered harmful, but sustained exposure or high doses can cause flu-like symptoms which include fatigue, headache, nausea, and even changes in a person's mental status (i.e. confusion).

TAR BALLS AND HEALTH

Tar balls are the result of weathered oil that has been shaped by wind and waves into clumps. An occasional brief contact with a small amount of oil in tar balls will do no harm. However, some people are especially sensitive to chemicals, including the hydrocarbons found in crude oil and petroleum products. They may have an allergic reaction, or develop dermatitis or a skin rash, even from brief contact with oil. If contact occurs, wash the area with soap and water, baby oil, petroleum jelly or a widely used, safe cleaning compound such as the cleaning paste sold at auto parts stores. Toxicology experts suggest that you avoid using chemical solvents, such as gasoline, kerosene, or diesel fuel on the skin. These hydrocarbon-based products, when applied to skin, may present a greater health hazard than the smeared tar ball itself. The workers on the beach picking up the tar balls should wear gloves and boots and not let the tar balls come into contact with the skin.

SKIN CONTACT

Prolonged skin contact with crude oil and petroleum products can cause skin irritation. The skin effects can be worsened by subsequent exposure to sunlight, because trace contaminants in the oil are more toxic when exposed to light.

INGESTION

Swallowing crude oil, unless in large quantities (e.g., more than eight ounces) is unlikely to result in anything more than transient nausea, possible vomiting, gastrointestinal tract disturbances, and self-limiting diarrhea.



Photo by: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

EYE EXPOSURE

Eye exposure can result in slight stinging and temporary redness. No permanent damage should result. The immediate treatment is to flush the eye with copious amounts of water for 15 minutes. If the person wears contacts, these should be removed first.

BOTTOM LINE: The oil spill has wreaked havoc in the lives of those living along the Gulf Coast. The community has lost 11 of its oil workers and hundreds of thousands fish, birds, and animals living in or along the Gulf. It is not yet possible to even estimate the economic damage that will impact the community. There are definite health hazards that can occur due to contact with the oil but if common sense prevails, there is a minimal amount of danger to humans.



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