



Dealing with Oil Contamination in Homes

On Monday, October 29, Hurricane Sandy impacted many areas throughout the state of New Jersey and New York. The storm caused flooding conditions along the coastline, in low lying areas, along rivers and creeks, and various other locations. The EPA, in support of FEMA, is working closely with federal, state and city officials in assessing and responding to environmental concerns. Personnel have been deployed to areas in New York and New Jersey to assess damage to the EPA's hazardous waste sites, work with the states to assess wastewater and drinking water plants, address oil spills in New Jersey, assess shoreline and near shore areas using an aircraft, sample coastal waters and provide technical assistance for dewatering efforts to clear the Battery underpass tunnel in New York City.

These conditions may have caused the release of petroleum-based products or other environmental hazards into flood waters and surface water bodies. Petroleum products may be from localized sources, such as home heating oil tanks located in basements, or industrial tanks located at petroleum storage facilities. As the water recedes, residual petroleum materials may be left behind. Odors may be present where petroleum products have been in contact with lawns, furniture, carpet, vegetation, building foundations, and most other materials. As a result, you may notice oil or other petroleum type smells. People can also be exposed to dangerous chemicals from everyday items such as household cleaners, fertilizers, and pesticides that may spill in or near the home during a flood. Be alert for leaking containers and reactive household chemicals, such as caustic drain cleaners and chlorine bleach.

HEALTH FAQs

AVOID CONTACT WITH FLOOD WATER, WHENEVER POSSIBLE!

Why should I avoid contact with flood waters?

Flood waters can pose various health risks. They may contain potentially dangerous materials such as sewage, agricultural runoff and hazardous chemicals. Exposure to flood waters can also cause infections or result in injuries. Buildings or facilities that have been damaged by or exposed to flood waters may also pose health risks from mold, chemicals, electrical hazards and displaced animals. continued on back >

What areas are affected by Hurricane Sandy?

Flooding is the most common consequence of the storm, and many areas throughout New Jersey and New York have been affected. In particular, coastal areas have seen the most impacts. However, properties in other areas may have been affected due to individual property conditions. EPA, along with other federal, state and local agencies want people to be aware of possible threats to human health and the environment associated with petroleum products and other environmental hazards.

What should I do if I have oily water in my basement?

Should you notice oil or hazardous substances in your basement along with water, you should not pump the water onto your lawn or in the street.

In New Jersey, please contact the NJDEP Hotline at 1-8778-WARN DEP or 1-877-927-6337 prior to removing the water from your basement or submerged room.

In New York State, please contact the NYSDEC hotline at 1-800-457-7362.

HEALTH FAQs (cont.)

What is causing the chemical odor in flood water?

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) found in oil are causing the odor. You can smell most pollutants well below levels that would cause health problems. Odors will be strongest in areas where oil is present.

Is the odor bad for my health?

It is important to understand that people are able to smell some VOCs at lower levels than would cause long-term health problems. Some of the chemicals that cause the odors may cause headaches, dizziness, nausea or vomiting. If you have severe nausea or other medical issues, see your health care provider as soon as possible.

What should I do if I get oil or chemicals on my skin or clothing?

Wash affected skin with soap and water. Avoid using harsh detergents, solvents, or other chemicals to wash oil from skin as they may promote absorption of the oil through the skin. If you get oil on your clothing, wash in the usual way but separate from other clothing.

How do I know if my drinking water has been affected by flooding?

Contact your local health department for specific advice. Fuel and other chemical releases and spills are common during flood events. Until you know the water is safe, use bottled water or some other safe supply of water for drinking.