

# FACT SHEET

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Connecticut Department of Public Health  
Environmental & Occupational Health Assessment Program  
410 Capitol Avenue MS # 11EOH, PO Box 340308  
Hartford, CT 06134-0308  
(860) 509-7740  
[www.ct.gov/dph](http://www.ct.gov/dph)



## Home Heating Oil Spills

Home heating oil spills occur when storage tanks develop a leak, are overfilled, or if the heating system malfunctions. Since heating oil tanks are often located in the basement, spills can result in contamination of the basement. Such spills are a safety hazard because fuel oil is combustible. Cleanup of an oil spill in the basement or other parts of your property can be very expensive. Odors from spilled oil can also make your house unpleasant to live in until the cleanup is completed. Sometimes the odors can linger well beyond the cleanup. Spills can contaminate soil and groundwater if the basement floor is dirt, the concrete is cracked or the spill is outdoors. This fact sheet provides you with answers to some of the common questions about home heating oil spills.



### What should I do if I have a fuel oil spill?

#### **Prevent an explosion or fire**

Although fuel oil is a combustible liquid, the following precautions are recommended: Turn off all flame and spark sources. Don't smoke or light matches in the area. Keep all sources of ignition away from the area until the spill is completely cleaned up.

#### **Report the spill**

Contact your local fire department first and let them know that you have had a spill. Then notify the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) by calling their 24-hour spills hotline (1-866-DEP-SPIL). These responders are critical to ensuring your home's safety from fire and protecting the environment. Their response will depend on the size and nature of your spill.

#### **Take steps to control odors**

If the tank is located in your basement, open basement windows to ventilate the area. If you have forced hot air heating, shut off the system and close the grills. Close the basement door and cover the gap at the bottom of the door. Close other openings that may allow vapors to enter the upper floors of your home. You should make every effort to seal off any air flow between the spill and the inhabited areas of your home to prevent fuel odors from absorbing into clothing, rugs and other home furnishings. You should act as quickly as possible to help lessen long-term odor problems.

#### **Prevent exposure**

Avoid breathing the fuel oil fumes for extended periods and prevent skin contact. If you must enter the spill area, wear rubber boots, gloves and protective eyewear. If the odor is strong in the living area of your home, consider staying at a motel or with relatives until the cleanup is complete. Moving out of your home for a few days may be a good idea, especially if there are young children, elderly, or infirmed people in the home.

## How should the spill be cleaned up?

Connecticut DEP will be able to provide guidance on cleaning up spills. It is usually best to have a licensed environmental spill cleanup contractor thoroughly remove the oil and scrub all surfaces free of the residue. However, homeowners may be able to clean up small spills on their own. If soil or groundwater becomes contaminated, a more extensive cleanup by licensed contractors may be necessary. If fuel odors persist after cleanup, it is important for the occupant or responsible party to further reduce the odors (additional cleaning, ventilation, removal of carpet or fabrics which may have absorbed odors, etc.).

## What are the health effects?

Home heating oil is less toxic than gasoline and has relatively low toxicity to humans. However, breathing fuel oil vapors for extended periods can still cause health problems. Typical symptoms include headaches, nausea, dizziness, and irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat. Some individuals may be more sensitive to these effects. Skin contact can cause mild irritation. These symptoms are not long-lasting and will generally disappear when fuel oil odors are reduced.

## Should I have air sampling done?

In general, air sampling for indoor air quality problems should not be your first step. Effort should be put into eliminating the cause(s) of your problem first. In the case of fuel spills, odor is a good indicator of contamination. When the odor disappears or is only slightly noticeable, the house should be safe for occupancy. Slight odors should not cause health effects in most people.

Air testing may be warranted if fuel odors are persistent for many months. Such testing ensures that potentially toxic ingredients in the oil are not causing a chronic health risk. The focus of the testing should be naphthalene, BTEX (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, xylenes), butanes/butenes and total petroleum hydrocarbons. Environmental contractors that conduct air testing can be found in the Yellow Pages. Be careful to get quotes from several contractors before making a final decision. Toxicologists at the Department of Public Health (DPH) can help you with interpreting the results of your tests (see contact information below).

## What can I do to prevent a heating oil spill in my home?

Check the condition of the oil tank and lines periodically. If one or both appear in poor or questionable condition, contact your oil dealer to determine if the tank or lines need to be replaced. Keep the vent line clear of any snow, ice, or insect nests to prevent pressurizing. CT DEP recommends that if you take your tank out of service, remove the tank and any fill and vent lines completely. If there are any transfer lines embedded in concrete, they should be properly abandoned and replaced with an above-ground line. Lines installed prior to pouring a concrete floor should be plastic coated or run through a PVC casing.

## Additional Questions?

CT DPH Environmental and Occupational Health Assessment Program - (860) 509-7740  
CT Department of Environmental Protection - (860) 424-3338

*This document was reviewed by staff from the CT Dept. of Environmental Protection and CT Dept. of Public Safety*