

# Heating Oil Contamination And Your Home

Many people have used oil for years to heat their homes without ever having a spill, but sometimes homes do become contaminated. Heating equipment and delivery problems are the main causes of spills, but there are other ways that properties can become contaminated. For example, flood waters containing fuel oil contaminated a number CT yards and houses as a result of recent hurricanes, tropical storms, and winter storms.

If you have a spill or oil contamination from heating equipment failure, an oil delivery over-fill, oil-contaminated storm waters or any other reason, do the following:



## 1. Prevent An Explosion Or Fire

- ◆ Turn off all flames – pilot lights, candles, gas fire logs, etc.
- ◆ Put out all cigarettes.
- ◆ Until the spill is completely cleaned up, do not touch light switches, outlets, radios, or any other electrical equipment in the area that could cause a spark or get hot.

## 2. Control Odors

- ◆ Open outside doors & windows to air out the space
- ◆ Turn off forced hot air heating and/or central air conditioning. Close or cover the grills.
- ◆ Close the door from the basement to first floor. Use a plastic shower liner or plastic table cloth to cover all cracks and gaps between the door, wall, and floor.

## 3. If You Smell Oil Or See Standing Oil – Report It!

- ◆ Call your local fire department
- ◆ Call 1-866-DEP-SPIL or 860-424-3338. This is the 24-hour spills hotline at the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP).

# Heating Oil Contamination And Your Home

Home heating oil is also called fuel oil or number 2 fuel oil. Most homes today that are heated with oil have oil tanks in the basement. The way potential exposure and cleanup is handled will depend upon whether contamination is in the soil, groundwater, or indoor air, and how much contamination is present.



## How can heating oil contaminate your property?

If any of these things happen, fuel oil can contaminate your property:

- ◆ Heating equipment problems (cracks in the oil tank, line to the furnace, gaskets & fittings, etc.)
- ◆ Oil delivery problems (overfills, spills, wrong address)
- ◆ Flood water containing home heating oil gets inside of your home and/or contaminates your yard
- ◆ A fuel oil leak on someone else's property gets into groundwater and then flows toward your home.



## What are some signs of home heating oil contamination?

- ◆ You smell oil in the basement
- ◆ You see standing oil or oil stains on the basement floor near the tank or furnace
- ◆ You see oily patches or stains on the ground in your yard
- ◆ You smell oil when you turn on water faucets



## What should you do if you suspect heating oil contamination in your home?

### **Prevent Fire or Explosion**

The most important thing is to prevent a fire or explosion.

- ◆ Make sure all flames are out— candles, fire place/pit fires, gas logs, and pilot lights on stoves, dryers, furnaces and any other appliances or equipment should be shut down right away.
- ◆ Do not turn on any devices that can get hot or cause a spark.
- ◆ Do not smoke! Put out all cigarettes, pipes, and cigars.
- ◆ Keep all sources of ignition away from the area until the spill is completely cleaned up.

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

- ◆ If a fuel oil spill is in the basement, open basement windows & door to the outside (if you have one) to ventilate the area. Put fans in the windows blowing to the outside to exhaust odorous air and speed the ventilation process.

- ◆ If you have forced hot air heating or central air conditioning, shut off the system and close or cover the grills.
- ◆ Close the door from the basement to first floor to keep fuel odors from entering the living space. This will prevent fuel odors from absorbing into clothing, rugs and other home furnishings. Seal the basement door by taping plastic sheeting (like a shower liner or plastic table cloth) over all cracks and gaps between the door, wall, and floor. Act as quickly as possible to help lessen long-term odor problems.

### **Report The Spill**

- ◆ **Call your town fire department**
- ◆ **Call 1-866-DEP-SPIL or 860-424-3338.**

**This is the 24-hour spills hotline** at the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP). They will advise you about how to proceed and how to handle the cleanup. Their advice will depend upon the size and nature of the spill or contamination.

### **How do I clean up the spill?**

You may need to hire a licensed environmental contractor if fuel oil has soaked into the soil or gotten into groundwater, or if a large amount of oil has spilled in the basement. DEEP will advise you about this and tell you what kind of work will need to be done. You may not be responsible for the cleanup if someone else was at fault. If the person (s) or company causing the contamination can be identified, they may be legally responsible for covering the costs associated with cleanup.

If a basement spill is very small, you may be able to do the cleanup yourself. DEEP can give you tips about how to soak up the oil and use fans to push the basement air outdoors. The better you ventilate the basement, the sooner the odors will go away. This can sometimes take days or weeks, depending upon the size of the spill. If fabric or any type of floor covering that can absorb oil has become contaminated, it should be thrown out. If strong odors in the living space continue to be a

problem after the cleanup has been completed, you may need to discard rugs, drapes, clothing, and anything else the fuel odor has soaked into.

### **What are the health effects?**

Vapors/odors from heating oil are less toxic than gasoline but can be very unpleasant. Everyone's tolerance is different, but some people report headaches, nausea, dizziness, and irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat after breathing fuel oil vapors. Skin contact can cause a mild irritation. These symptoms are not long-lasting and go away when the odor is gone.

### **How can I prevent exposure?**

The best way of preventing exposure is to have your furnace checked every year by a qualified service company.

If there is a spill, avoid breathing in fuel oil vapor for extended periods of time. Avoid getting fuel oil on your skin. Stay away from the spill. If you must enter the spill area, wear rubber boots, gloves and protective eyewear. If oil gets on shoes, try not to track it to other areas.

If the odor is strong in the living area of your home and it is making you feel ill, you may need to temporarily move out until the cleanup is complete. This is especially wise if the household includes young children or people with fragile or chronic health conditions.

### **What about testing?**

If fuel oil is in groundwater or soil, the licensed environmental contractor will usually collect water and soil samples to help guide their cleanup activities. Air samples are usually not collected in a basement after a spill because the odor is a good indicator of whether any exposure remains. It is more cost effective to concentrate on cleanup and ventilation instead of air testing.

## When Might Air Testing For Fuel Oil Be Useful?

While there is little value in collecting air samples before cleaning up, there are a couple of occasions when air testing may be useful after spill cleanup has been completed. Air testing may be considered:

- ◆ If fuel oil odor in the living areas of the house continues to be a concern even after a basement spill has been cleaned up, air testing may help to show whether the air concentrations represent a health concern.
- ◆ If the remediation plan calls for installation of a sub-slab ventilation system to control vapor intrusion from contaminated groundwater or soil below the basement floor, the consultant may test the air to help evaluate the effectiveness of the system.

If air, water, or soil testing is planned, note that new recommended test methods for fuel oil have been developed by DEEP. Have your consultant call the CT DPH or CT DEEP to be sure that their sampling conforms with the new test methods.

### Contact:

#### CT Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP)

##### Emergency Response and Spill Prevention Program

860-424-3338  
or Toll Free :  
1-866-DEP-SPIL  
(1-866-337-7745)

##### Report 24 /7

##### Remediation/Site Cleanup Program

860-424-3705

#### CT Dept. of Public Health (CT DPH)

##### Environmental and Occupational Health Assessment Program

860-509-7740  
[www.ct.gov/dph/ieq](http://www.ct.gov/dph/ieq)

## An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth A Pound Of Cure

If you have a service plan with a local oil delivery company, be sure to have them to do a yearly equipment check. If you do not have a service plan, you may be able to pay a small fee for them to do this each year. At the very least, there are some things you should inspect yourself at least once per year.



### Do This At Least Once Per Year:

- ◆ Check the condition of your oil tank. Look for blisters, wet spots, rust, dents, bulges, or drips.
- ◆ Check the lines and fittings from the tank to the furnace- look for drips.

If you see any of these conditions, call your oil company right away. They should come and inspect the equipment and determine whether anything needs to be repaired or replaced. This important safety step will help protect you and your family.



*If you require aid/accommodation to fully and fairly enjoy this publication, please contact 860 509-7740*