



Chancellor Leodrey Williams
P. O. Box 10010
Baton Rouge, LA 70810

(225) 771-2242
(225) 771-2861 FAX

www.SUAGCENTER.com

presented by:
Dr. Fatemeh Malekian

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Oil Spill and Possible Impact on Human Health in Louisiana

The explosion of the Transocean Deepwater Horizon rig on April 20, 2010 killed 11 people and made British Petroleum's (BP) oil spill the largest manmade disaster in U.S. history. This disaster threatens coastal Louisiana, Gulf Coast fisheries, Gulf of Mexico ecosystems and perhaps the East Coast as the spill reaches the loop current.

People are exposed to hazardous substances related to the spill by breathing them (**air**), swallowing them (**food, water**) or by touching them (**skin**). Oil spill clean-up brings workers and volunteers into close contact with chemicals that are known to be hazardous to human health.

Impact of oil spill on human health:

In the past, oil spill effects on human health have included: cuts, sprains, contusion, respiratory problems, dermatitis, headache, throat irritation, itchy eyes, sore eyes, sore throat, back ache, dizziness, and DNA damage.

1. **Air:** people who live in close proximity to the spill can smell the **chemicals** in the oil from the shore. Exposure to low levels of these chemicals can cause irritation of eyes, nose, throat and skin. People with lung disease and asthma may become more sensitive than otherwise. Also, **Burning oil:** when responders burn oil, some "Particulate Matter" (mixture of very small particles and liquid droplets found in the air) may reach the shore posing a greater risk for people who have asthma or lung diseases.

What to do: If you smell smoke or gas or know that fires are nearby

- Stay indoor
- Set your air conditioner to reuse indoor air
- If you have to go out wear mask, and proper clothing
- Avoid physical activities that put extra work on your lung and heart

2. **Food:**

Crude oil has the potential to taint seafood with flavor and odors caused by exposure to hydrocarbons.

What to do: Listen to the state and federal regulatory agencies for facts regarding the seafood safety

- Avoid consuming affected seafood

3. **Water:**

- Drinking water and household water are not expected to be affected by the spill

- Water used for recreation may be affected
- Swimming in water contaminated with chemicals from the oil spill could cause health problems.

What to do:

- Follow the local and state public health guidelines regarding the use of beaches, swimming, boating etc.
- If you get close to water wear proper clothing
- Wear mask

Dispersants:

- Oil spill dispersants are used to break oil slick into small drops for clean up purposes
- Contact with small amount of dispersants will not harm
- Longer contact can cause rash and dry skin, and irritation to the eyes.
- Breathing or swallowing can cause health problems

What to do: If you are exposed to oil or dispersants - see a doctor immediately.

References:

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