



Hurricane Sandy Cleanup: Oil Contamination in Soil

Conditions following the recent storm may have caused the release of petroleum-based products or other environmental hazards that could have affected your home or property. Petroleum products may be from localized sources, such as home heating oil tanks located in basements, or industrial tanks located at petroleum storage facilities. When residual petroleum materials are left behind, oil staining on homes, gardens and soil may be noticeable.

Deposits of home heating oil and other petroleum products cause odors and are generally difficult to clean up. Volatile organic compounds present 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. However, oil is biodegradable. This means that under proper conditions oil products naturally break down. Over time you may notice an appreciable drop in odors as the oil begins this natural process.

Recommendations:

- Visible pools of oil: If there is visibly pooled oil, in New Jersey contact the NJDEP at 877-927-6337, and in New York contact the NYSDEC at 800-457-7362 to report the spilled oil.
- Contact your insurance company: Insurance companies should act quickly to address oil contamination covered by their policies. In most cases, insurers should take actions needed to restore homes to a habitable condition without waiting for written instruction from the state or local agencies. If questions arise, contact the numbers above.
- Contact FEMA: Homeowners who do not have insurance that covers oil spills may seek assistance from FEMA by calling 1-800-621-FEMA/1-800-621-3362 and requesting Individual Assistance (IA). The IA inspector will assess the situation as part of their overall evaluation of flood damage.
- Oil on lawns or gardens: If you have oil-stained areas on the outside of your home visible on lawns, shrubbery, vegetable gardens, flower beds, etc. the best approach may be to leave the areas alone. Do not allow children to play in areas that are visually contaminated with oil. Avoid tracking oil inside the home on shoes or on the feet of house pets.
- Clipping oil-stained plants: Oil-stained grass and the above-ground portions of other hardy perennials or annuals that are at the end of their growing season may be cut. Prevent exposure by wearing protective gear such as rubber gloves and shoes. Cut the grass or plants without disturbing the root layer. The clippings should be composted or disposed of in your regular household garbage disposal program.
- Composting the clippings: Any grass clippings that remain after a mowing, especially a composting type of lawn mower where dry organic matter will be left to biodegrade, will actually benefit conditions by absorbing the oil and provide a structure upon which the microorganisms can degrade the oil.
- Oil-stained garden beds and exposed soil: For oil-stained garden beds and soil where there is lack of complete plant coverage, incorporate mulch into the bed, such as bark mulch or wood mulch/chips. If compost of any form is available, this material would be an excellent addition to these affected areas as compost adds nutrients for the microorganisms to grow and degrade the oil.
- Oil inside the home in basements or crawl spaces: To minimize odors throughout the house, keep any doors closed between the main living area and the space where the oil release occurred. If possible, ventilate the area where the oil is present. Information on how to address oil contamination within a home and about health effects can be found in the New York State Department of Health's publication, "What Do Homeowners Need to Know About Oil Spills and Flooding?" (PDF) (156 KB).
- If you get oil or chemicals on your 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.