

Safety and Health Issues Related to Oil Spill Cleanup

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires that oil spill cleanup workers receive training about hazards they might encounter while working. The hazards vary depending on the jobs that workers are doing, how the work is being done and where the worksite is located. Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves, safety glasses and clothing, varies considerably by job tasks. Workers should follow their training for guidance on proper PPE use.

This factsheet addresses hazards that onshore workers and volunteers may encounter during oil spill cleanup.

Exposure to crude oil – Skin contact with weathered oil may cause skin irritation or rashes. Oil droplets/oily particles put into the air during cleanup operations can be irritating to eyes, nose, throat and lungs. If you get oil on your skin, wash it well with soap and water.

Heat stress – In warm weather, heat stress can occur, particularly when wearing full body PPE. Take frequent drinks and breaks. Drink water or sports drinks. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks. Monitor yourself and coworkers. Early signs include headache, thirst, profuse sweating and muscle aches.

Slips, trips and falls – Many surfaces, including steps, ladder rungs and rocks may be slippery from oil. Be careful walking over debris that is covered with water or oil. Be extremely careful if you are handling or carrying anything.

Trench foot – Trench foot, also known as immersion foot, occurs when feet are wet for long periods of time. It can be quite painful. To prevent trench foot air-dry and elevate your feet, and exchange wet shoes and socks for dry ones whenever possible.

Noise – Use hearing protection whenever noisy equipment is used. If you can't have a normal conversation with someone three feet away or closer, you probably need hearing protection.

Heavy Equipment – Be alert to the activities around you. Do not walk under or through areas where heavy equipment is lifting objects or behind equipment. Avoid exposure to gasoline or diesel combustion exhaust from powered generators in the clean-up area. Inhalation to these substances can produce an effect similar to alcohol intoxication.

Wildlife – The wetlands have a wide variety of wildlife including snakes, alligators, spiders and insects. Workers may also get bit while rescuing animals exposed to oil. Remember, some of the animals are found in inland, woody areas, not sandy shorelines.

Snakes – Be on the alert for snakes that swim in the water or hide under debris or other objects. If you see a snake, back away from it slowly. If you or someone else is bitten by a snake remember the color and pattern of the snake, which can help with treatment. Do not attempt to catch the snake! Cottonmouths (the most common poisonous snake in Southern Louisiana) have a distinctive white lining in their mouths. Other non-venomous snakes live in the marshy areas. If a person is bitten by a snake, keep the person calm and seek medical attention as soon as possible. Do not apply a tourniquet, do not attempt to cut and suck, and do not apply ice to the site.

Alligators – Alligators live in the freshwater areas of the marshes and swamps, as well as in brackish environments (between salt and fresh waters). Alligators are often difficult to see when just below the surface of water. Alligators have crushing bites and should be avoided.

Spiders – Several species of non-venomous spiders live in the salt marshes and in the grassy marsh areas. Poisonous Black Widow spiders may be present in the woods. They are distinguished by their shiny black color and the red hourglass-shaped mark on their abdomen. Their webs can be found in woodpiles, rubble piles, under stones, in hollow stumps and in rodent burrows. The severity of an individual's reaction to the Black Widow spider bite depends on the area of the body bitten, amount of venom injected and their sensitivity to the venom. The bite initially may go unnoticed, but some people report a short stabbing pain. Pain and muscle cramping are indications of a more serious reaction.

Mosquitoes/Chiggers – Use insect repellents that contain DEET or Picaridin to repel mosquitoes. Chiggers (also called berry bugs or harvest mites) are found in the woods. Follow label directions carefully to avoid overexposure to repellent products.

Animal Bites and Rabies – Bites from terrestrial animals (skunks, raccoons, foxes, bats, etc.) should be considered potential transmissions for rabies and must be reported to

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public health authorities. Bites by stray dogs and cats should also be reported. Marine animals, reptiles, amphibians and birds do not transmit rabies.

Poisonous Plants –Learn to recognize and avoid Poison Oak and Poison Sumac. Use gloves and wear long pants when the possibility of contacting poisonous plants exists. If used within the first 15 minutes after exposure, soap and water may help remove some of the oily resin. Clothes, shoes and tools may become contaminated by coming in contact with poisonous plants. Washing in hot water with laundry detergent will remove the resin from clothing, but not from leather. The allergens from burning poisonous plants can be inhaled, causing lung irritation. These plants are found inland, not in salt marshes or shoreline.

REMEMBER – The key to a safe response is attention to the safety issues of your work environment. If you are unsure about an activity or operation, stop what you are doing and consult with a supervisor.

If you have any questions or concerns about an exposure, animal or plant identification, health effects, or appropriate medical treatment, contact the Louisiana Poison Center: 1-800-222-1222.

This factsheet was prepared by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals' Office of Public Health, and the Louisiana Poison Center.