

Yellowstone River 2011: Silvertip Pipeline Spill Light Crude Oil and Your Health



What is light crude oil?

Light crude oil is a mix of thousands of different chemicals, but it is mostly hydrogen and carbon. It comes out of the ground as liquid petroleum.

Where will the oil from the spill go?

When oil is spilled in a river, it spreads in the water. Some of the oil will dissolve in the water. Some will collect in areas where the water flow slows down. The oil in the river can spread through the river banks and mix with water supplies beneath the land surface (groundwater). Oil moves much more slowly through the ground than it does in the water. Because it spreads so slowly, the oil will also not spread as far in the ground as it does in the water.

Authorities may test water from wells (drinking, agricultural, and livestock) in areas where the river water may have mixed with groundwater.

Are there health threats from the oil?

For most people brief contact with a small amount of oil will do no harm. Some people are more sensitive to chemicals, including those found in crude oil. These people may develop a rash or skin irritation or have other allergic reactions.

Skin contact with crude oil that lasts a long time can cause skin reddening, swelling, and burning. The skin effects can get worse if the skin is exposed to the sun. Skin contact can also make you more likely to develop a rash or skin infection.

Light crude oil may also be irritating if it contacts your eyes.

Swallowing small amounts (less than a coffee cup) of oil will cause upset stomach, vomiting, and diarrhea, but is unlikely to have long-lasting health effects.

If you are worried about your health because of the oil spill, talk with a doctor about your concerns.





How can I avoid health threats from the oil?

Avoid areas of the river where there is oil and where workers are cleaning up oil.

Avoid skin contact with oil. If you are involved in clean-up efforts, wear gloves, eye protection, and clothing that cover your arms and legs.

If you get oil on your skin, wash with soap and water, baby oil, petroleum jelly, or a cleaning paste for hands such as those sold at auto parts stores. Do not use solvents, gasoline, kerosene, diesel fuel, or similar products to clean oil off skin.

If you get oil in your eyes, flush them with water for 15 minutes.

If you swallow oil, do not try to vomit it, as this may get oil into your lungs.

If you breathe in oil fumes, move indoors or to an area away from the oil.

- Stay indoors in an air-conditioned room and set the air conditioner to the “recirculation” mode.
- If you do not have air conditioning, try to leave the area near the oil. It is most important to leave during the hottest times of the day when the oil fumes are strongest.
- If you have trouble sleeping because of the oil fumes, try to find some place away from the fumes where you can stay for awhile.

If you have breathed in a lot of fumes and you have trouble breathing, your chest hurts or feels tight, or you feel dizzy, see a doctor right away.