

Dispersants and Your Health

What are oil spill dispersants?

Oil spill dispersants are products that break an oil slick into small drops and stop the oil from coming back together to make a new slick. They do not remove oil from water but they do make it easier for nature to break down the oil. Broken down oil is less likely to stick to animals, rocks, and plants.

How are oil spill dispersants used?

Oil spill dispersants are sprayed on top of a slick from planes and ships. They can also be forced under the surface of the water to break up oil before it reaches the surface.

What are the health threats of oil spill dispersants?

For most people brief contact with a small amount of oil spill dispersants will do no harm.

If your skin is exposed to dispersants for a long time, a rash and dry skin could develop. Dispersants can also irritate your eyes.

If you breathe in dispersants for a long time or several times they can irritate your nose, throat, and lungs.

Swallowing dispersants will cause upset stomach, vomiting, and diarrhea.

If you are exposed to dispersants for a long time or several times they can also cause central nervous system effects; sleepiness; damage to your blood, kidney or liver; and a metallic taste in your mouth.

How can I avoid the health threats of oil spill dispersants?

Most people will not be exposed to enough oil spill dispersants to be affected.

If you are working on the spill, wear nitrile or PVC gloves, coveralls, boots, and chemical splash goggles to keep dispersants off your skin and out of your eyes.

If you breathe in dispersants, move to an area where the air is clearer.

If you get dispersants on your skin, immediately wash with soap and water. If symptoms develop, seek medical attention.

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

If you swallow dispersants, do not try to vomit, as this may get dispersants into your lungs and cause pneumonia. Wash out your mouth with water and seek medical attention.

