

How to deal with domestic oil spills

Guidance for householders

Check your insurance now! Ensure your property is covered against oil spills. In the event of an oil spill, call your insurance company immediately.

This guidance sets out our advice for householders (owners and occupiers) on how to deal with small scale oil spills from domestic heating oil tanks. It has no legal status.

Guidance on actions that can be taken to avoid oil spills is provided in:

- Get to know your oil tank: A guide to looking after your oil storage tank and avoiding pollution: (www.oftec.org.uk)
- PPG 22: Dealing with spills: (www.netregs.org.uk)
- UK Spill Association website: (www.ukspill.org) or International Spill Accreditation Association website: (www.isaa.org.uk)

What you should do if you have a spill or leak?

If you suspect an oil leak at your home, you should **act quickly and contact your insurance company**. Don't put off taking action or assume the problem will go away. The quicker the leak can be dealt with, the less oil will be lost and further damage can be minimised.

If you have a spill, follow these steps:

- **If there's a strong smell of oil in your home**, ventilate the area by opening windows and doors and contact the Environmental Health department at your local authority for advice.
- **Keep children and pets away from any spills.**
- Avoid getting oil on your skin and clothing. Wash your hands and don't smoke, eat or drink when or after you are in contact with the oil.
- Switch off your oil supply at the tank and try to find out where the leak is coming from.
- Immediately, try to stop it at the source. Put a bucket under dripping oil to catch it (don't use containers that will be used to store food for humans or animals).
- Prevent spilled oil from spreading and, in particular, prevent it from getting into drains and waterways. Use absorbing material such as earth, sand, cat litter or commercial products.
- If there's an ongoing leak from the tank, try to stem the flow. You may be able to use sealant to temporarily repair a metal tank. For plastic tanks, rub a bar of soft soap into the split.
- Try to establish how much oil has been lost, check the level on the tank and think about how much you use and when you last had a delivery
- Never use detergents or a hose to wash the spill away.
- Store anything with oil on it or soaked into it in containers that won't leak until it can be correctly and legally disposed of.
- If the oil has or could enter drains or the water environment (groundwater, ponds, burns, rivers, lochs, estuaries or coastal waters) you must contact SEPA. If it's likely to affect a public water supply you must contact Scottish Water. If it's likely to affect private water supplies you must contact your local authority environmental health department. If your water supply or pipes may have been affected, **don't** drink the water.
- Arrange for any remaining fuel in the tank to be removed by a fuel supplier. Don't try to do this yourself and don't store oil in a building, shed or vehicle.
- Check with your insurer whether they or you should arrange for an engineer to repair or replace your tank or pipework. Damaged plastic tanks can't be repaired.
- Keep a record of any actions you have taken.

If your building and contents policy permits, your insurance company will appoint a specialist contractor on your behalf. If your insurance doesn't provide adequate cover you can call the UK Spill Contractors Accreditation Scheme on 0845 6259 890 or visit: www.ukspill.org.uk or the International Spill Accreditation Association website: (www.isaa.org.uk) to find a local contractor.

Clean-up

If the spill has contaminated the ground, the soil will need to be cleaned up along with any floating oil and any affected waters. This is likely to involve specialist environmental contractors that may be appointed by your insurers. You or your contractor will need to contact SEPA for advice on the safe disposal and/or treatment of contaminated soils or waters.

In the event of anything other than a recent clearly confirmed minor spill that has not spread, you're advised not to attempt to undertake any clean-up works yourself, given the potential health risks and the specialist nature of remediation and waste disposal.

What now? Ensure it doesn't happen again

Oil tanks can leak for a variety of reasons, but the most common are:

- failures of the tank body;
- damage to equipment on the tank such as sight gauges;
- damage to or wear-and-tear failures of fuel feed lines;
- failures of components at the boiler end of the system, such as flexible hoses.

Metal tanks can rust through, often at their bases.

Plastic tanks can split due to inherent defect or age/wear-and-tear, and spills can occur when oil is delivered.

By following some basic rules you can minimise the risk of another spill. For example:

- Keep your tank and fittings well maintained and regularly tested by a suitably qualified contractor.
- Always be present when your tank is filled.
- If you replace your tank, ensure it's placed away from high risk locations.
- Ensure your tank is compliant with local building control regulations.
- Carry out monthly visual inspections of your tank, see the Oil Care website: (<http://oilcare.org.uk>) for what to look for.
- Note if the level of oil in your tank drops suddenly, or if your boiler starts cutting-out.
- Obtain a copy of your insurers guide to dealing with oil spill emergencies and keep it close to your boiler or tank.
- Obtain a domestic oil spill kit for use in emergencies.

Useful contacts

SEPA Pollution Hotline number - 0800 80 70 60

Scottish Water customer helpline - 0800 0778778

Your local authority environmental health –

Your local authority building control -

Your insurance company -

