

How to deal with domestic oil spills

Guidance for householders

In the event of an oil spill, call your insurance company immediately

This guidance sets out our advice on how to deal with small scale oil spills, such as kerosene and diesel from domestic heating oil tanks. Spills of oil and chemicals may have an impact on the water environment, on human health and may affect the wider environment.

This guidance is intended to help householders take appropriate action after a spill. It has no legal status other than guidance.

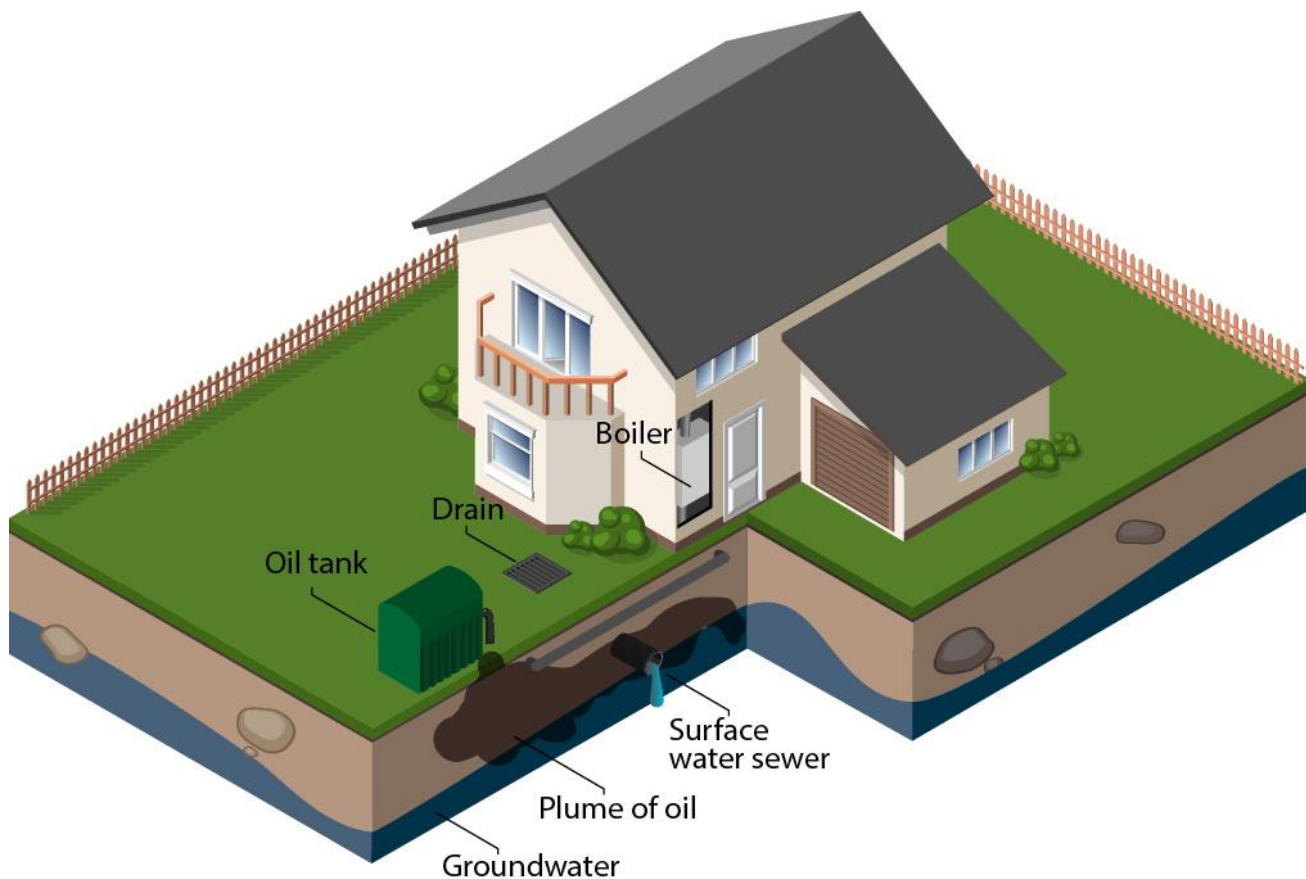
Key actions you can take to avoid oil spills are described in the last section. Separate guidance is provided in [Get to know your oil tank](#).

Reasons for oil tank leaks

Oil tanks can leak for a variety of reasons; 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
- failure 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.



Who is responsible?

Anyone who uses, stores, fills, transports or manufactures hazardous substances, this includes oils, has a responsibility to ensure the substance is contained and used in a way that won't result in a release to the environment. They also have a responsibility to clean-up any spills that occur and deal with any consequences of the release.

Whether you own or occupy premises that have a domestic oil tank, you're advised to check with your insurance company that you have adequate home insurance in place to cover costs associated with all aspects of the assessment and clean-up of a spill, and any consequences of migration of the spill.

If you have had a spill, you should contact your insurer(s) immediately. If your building and contents policy permits, your insurance company will appoint a specialist contractor on your behalf. However, if you don't have the necessary insurance cover, you will need to appoint a specialist contractor yourself. Appropriately qualified and accredited contractors can be found on the [UK Spill Association website](#) or the [International Spill Accreditation Association website](#). You should also notify your [local authority](#) (environmental health) and [SEPA](#), who will not be able to clear up the spill for you, but may be able to offer advice.

What should be done in the event of 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 your insurance doesn't provide adequate cover, you might find it helpful to call the [UK Spill Contractors Accreditation Scheme](#) on 0845 6259 890 to find a local contractor or the [International Spill Accreditation Association \(ISAA\)](#) on 01467 632282.

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.
- 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. For example, you may be able to use sealant to temporarily repair a metal tank. For plastic tanks, try rubbing 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 don'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). If your water supply or pipework 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 take.

What next? Determining clean-up requirements

If the spill has contaminated the ground, the soil will need to be cleaned up along with any floating oil and any affected waters.

Practical questions at the outset

- Is there a strong smell of oil indoors?
- Has the oil spread away off your land, under your house or down a drain?
- Are there any burns, pond, loch or drain, or private water supplies in the immediate area?

If the answers to the above questions are no and you can be sure that the spill is recent, small and limited to shallow soil, then this is a minor spill; follow the advice in Box 1 unless your insurance company, SEPA or local authority instructs you otherwise.

| Box 1 – Only for clearly confirmed minor spills (as described above) | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Query? | Test: | Decide: | Action: | Record: |
| If it is a clearly confirmed minor spill... then> | Check soil, working out from the source of spill to find out where the oil now is. | If limited to a few buckets worth of soil then> | Dig up oily and stained soils. Remove all oil. Dispose of soil correctly. | The actions taken; photos and any soil sample results. |

However, if any of the answers are yes or you aren't sure about the extent of the spill, then you **may** have a larger, more complicated scenario to deal with. A larger spill of oil has the potential to contaminate a lot more soil and groundwater. In this case, both soil and groundwater need to be assessed and possibly cleaned up. This is likely to involve specialist environmental contractors that may be appointed by your insurers. Please contact your local authority, or, if there is a possibility of contamination of water, also contact SEPA, as well as your insurers to obtain more information on what to do.

Clean-up

Clean-up works will generally only be carried out by specialist environmental contractors. If your building and contents policy permits, your insurance company will appoint a specialist contractor on your behalf.

However, if you don't have the necessary insurance cover, you will need to appoint a specialist contractor yourself. Unless your spill is a minor spill, we don't advise you to attempt to clean-up the oil yourself, given the potential health risks and the specialist nature of remediation and waste disposal.

You or your contractor will need to contact us for advice on the safe disposal and/or treatment of contaminated soils or waters.

It's important that appropriate steps are taken to check that the ground and/or water has been adequately cleaned-up. The extent and type of checks will depend on the extent of the spill and its impact, and any regulatory requirements.

For example, for small spills that haven't spread or contaminated the water environment, a documented visual and odour inspection to confirm that all contamination has been removed may be sufficient.

In the case of larger spills, confirmatory investigations should be undertaken by specialist contractors and in accordance with UK best practice.

What now? Ensuring it doesn't happen again

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

- Keep your tank and fittings well maintained.
- Always be present when your tank is filled.
- If you replace your tank, ensure it's placed away from high risk locations, above ground (if possible) and installed by an OFTEC registered or other reputable installation contractor.
- Ensure your tank is compliant with local building control regulations.
- Carry out monthly visual inspections of your tank, see the [Oil Care website](#) for what to look for.
- Note if the level of oil in your tank drops suddenly, if your boiler starts cutting-out or if you detect any unexplained odours or ground movement.
- 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.
- Ensure above ground tanks and pipework are inspected by a suitably qualified professional at least once a year, usually at the same time your boiler is checked and serviced.
- Ensure underground tanks are leak tested at the recommended intervals (three-five yearly for underground tanks).
- If your underground tank is more than 20 years old, ensure it is leak tested every year and consider replacing it with an above ground tank.

Note:

If you notice a drop in oil level, don't assume that oil has been stolen etc, as leaks of underground fuel lines can often be ongoing for some time, prior to oil contamination becoming visible.

Further guidance is available in 'Get to know your oil tank' and 'Dealing with spills: PPG 22'.

Related document and references

- [Verification of remediation of land contamination](#), SCO30114/R1, Feb 2010, Environment Agency
- [Get to know your oil tank: A guide to looking after your oil storage tank and avoiding pollution](#), Environment Agency
- [PPG 22: Dealing with spills](#), April 2011, NIEA/SEPA/EA
- [UK Spill Association website](#) or [International Spill Accreditation Association \(ISAA\) website](#)
- [PPG27: Installation, decommissioning and removal or underground storage tanks](#), Environment Agency

Useful contacts

- SEPA Pollution Hotline number - 0800 80 70 60
- Scottish Water customer helpline - 0800 0778778
- Local authorities – Contact details for each of the Scottish local authorities are available on the [Scottish Government website](#)

Check your insurance now! Ensure your property is covered against oil spills.

