

Chemical Spills & Prevention

Prepare & Prevent Instead of Repair & Repent

When working with chemicals such as fuel, solvents, and oils, opportunities for leaks and spills can occur. Depending on the location of the leak or spill, its effects could be harmful to the environment, including our drinking water and soil.

When working with chemicals we have a responsibility to protect ourselves and our community. There are a variety of proactive methods to prevent spills and protect our environment, such as:

- Cover nearby drains and do not pour chemicals or oil down any drains.
- Secure containers and storage areas when not in use.
- Ensure a spill kit is provided near all chemical storage and refueling areas.
- Use a funnel when transferring chemicals to a different container.



- Ask a supervisor if unsure how to properly dispose of a chemical.
- When storing chemicals, ensure containers have secondary containment to collect any leaks or spills.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has many regulatory programs, such as Spill Prevention, Control, and Countermeasures (SPCC), and the Oil Pollution Prevention rule, that regulate the prevention of, preparedness for, and response to chemical/oil leaks and spills, with a goal to prevent chemicals/oil from reaching navigable waters and adjoining shorelines. Regulations like these are an effort to protect our drinking water from pollutants, as well as our local aquatic life.

Below are some tips on how to minimize the spread and damage of a chemical, oil, or solvent spill:

- **Contain and control the spill:** Use spill kit materials such as absorbent socks or kitty litter around the spill or leak to prevent further spread, especially down a drain.
- **Turn off ignition sources:** To prevent fires, turn off ignition sources such as burners and motors.
- **Report spills immediately:** After stopping the source if possible, warn everyone nearby and call University Police at 456 to report the hazardous material spill.
- **Do your part:** Review *Chemical Spills Overview Training* at myhr.northwestern.edu.



Dave St. Aubin, Engineer, using a spill kit funnel over a containment to prevent a chemical spill

Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

- **Preparation is Key:** Keep the topic relevant to your work. With your team, review commonly used materials in your department and discuss what to do if any of them are spilled, and how it applies to your work.
- **Stay Positive:** Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.
- **Share a Story, Ask for a Story:** Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Safety at Home

Did you know? Children younger than 6 years comprise nearly half of poison exposures (48%), followed by adults (38%), then teens (7%). Ensuring household chemicals are safely stored can prevent both spills and accidental exposure. By following the tips below, you can help prevent harmful exposure to your family home and also care for the environment:

- Keep children off recently fertilized grass; wait at least an hour after it dries.
- Place capped and sealed cleaning products on a higher shelf to prevent easy access for children.
- Get accurate answers – Poison Control can be reached at 800-222-1222.
- Do not use a water hose to wash contaminants such as oil spills or antifreeze off your driveway – use kitty litter or other absorbent materials to soak up chemicals.
- Never dump anything directly into a storm drain. Instead, contact your local city/town for household chemical disposal locations.

For Additional Information

Please contact [Gwen Butler](mailto:Gwen.Butler@northwestern.edu), Director of Environmental Health and Safety, at 847.491.4936 with any questions. Risk Management Services can be reached at 847.491.5610 or risk@northwestern.edu.