QUESTION: Is my water safe to drink?

ANSWER: At this point, the oil spill is not expected to affect public drinking water or private well water. If your water becomes unsafe to drink, your water supplier must notify you by newspaper, mail, radio, television or hand-delivery. This would be based on the water failing to meet criteria established by the Environmental Protection Agency or state standards or if there is a waterborne disease emergency. In the unlikely event that oil enters the public water supply, the notice will describe any precautions needed, such as seeking alternate sources of water.

QUESTION: Are shellfish and fin fish safe to eat?

ANSWER: Any fish available for commercial sale, for example, fish in grocery stores, comes from non-contaminated waters. Contaminated fish and seafood will not be allowed on the market by regulatory agencies. However, based on common sense, if a fish obtained from any source smells or tastes like oil, do not eat it.

QUESTION: What about swimming and boating?

ANSWER: Advisories with signs will be posted for specific bodies of water, but do not swim, ski or paddle a surfboard in any waters visibly affected by oil. Do not drive your boat through oil slicks or sheens.

QUESTION: May I safely sit on the beach, walk barefooted and dip my feet in the surf?

ANSWER: Heed any advisories, and use common sense. You want to avoid any visible areas with oil.

QUESTION: Is the odor harmful? What happens if I breathe the oil mist?

ANSWER: Petroleum fumes can be an irritant for some people. The odor may cause symptoms such as lightheadedness, nausea, vomiting or headaches. The EPA recommends you limit your exposure to the odor by staying indoors. To the extent possible, close windows and doors, turn your air conditioner on and set it to a recirculation mode. If you are experiencing severe incidents of nausea or other medical issues, seek care as soon as possible.
QUESTION: What if I am having breathing problems?

ANSWER: Some people may be sensitive to any change in air quality, which could cause respiratory symptoms such as cough or shortness of breath. If you have these symptoms, stay indoors, ventilate your home with air conditioning, and avoid strenuous outdoor activity. If these symptoms do not improve, you should consider contacting your primary care physician or other health care provider for medical advice, especially if you have pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma or other respiratory illness.

QUESTION: What if I get oil on myself or my clothing?

ANSWER: While you should avoid direct contact with oil, oil-contaminated water or sediment, wash off any oil on your skin with soap and water. Do not use solvents or chemicals when washing your skin as these can be more harmful than the oil itself. Prolonged exposure to oil may cause some people to get a skin rash. If you get oil on your clothing, wash in the usual way. There is no need to use special detergents, solvents or other chemicals.

QUESTION: How do I safely clean up my property after an oil spill?

ANSWER: Training will be provided to professionals and volunteers involved in cleanup. On your own property, be sure to follow all public health recommendations or consider hiring an experienced, professional spill contractor. Wear protective clothing and dispose of oil-saturated materials properly.

QUESTION: What is the government doing to protect us?

ANSWER: Many federal, state and local agencies are working to protect your health and safety. For example, NOAA is restricting seafood harvesting in areas contaminated by oil. Several agencies are working to keep communities along the Gulf Coast informed. Alabama Department of Public Health employees have been involved through participation in the Joint Information Center and will issue health advisories when needed.

QUESTION: Is any air monitoring being done?

ANSWER: EPA responders began portable monitoring of air quality on April 28 and began water sampling on April 30. Aircraft were deployed to collect air sample data and provide aerial photographs and will continue tracking. The results of EPA’s sampling efforts will be posted at www.epa.gov/bpspill. EPA will make recommendations for the public to take based upon the results of environmental monitoring. In addition, the Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health (under contract with BP) is monitoring air quality between Venice, La., and Pensacola, Fla.

QUESTION: What are the long-term health effects?

ANSWER: Based on what we know, if exposure durations are brief, long-term health effects are not anticipated.