Potential Health Impacts from Crude Oil Fact Sheet

What kind of material is involved in this Refugio oil spill?
Spilled oil is from a family of several hundred compounds known collectively as total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH).

How might people be exposed to crude oil and how can it affect one’s health?
Exposure to crude oil may occur by breathing crude oil vapors, getting the oil on your skin, or ingesting crude oil through contaminated sea water or seafood. Depending on the level of exposure, breathing crude oil vapors may cause coughing and throat irritation, headache and nausea, drowsiness, or dizziness. Skin and eye contact may cause irritation and redness. People should not eat seafood from the affected areas until it is tested and deemed safe. Precautions are being taken during the cleanup to keep people away from those shorelines impacted by crude oil. If you do get crude oil or tarballs on your skin, it is recommended that the area be washed with soap and water as soon as possible, as some people may be more sensitive to these crude oil compounds than others.

How likely is crude oil to cause cancer?
Crude oil is comprised of several hundred compounds, some of which are known to cause cancer. However, limited exposure to crude oil for short periods of time is unlikely to cause long term health effects.

Is there a medical test to show if someone has been exposed to crude oil?
Although there are no medical tests to show if a person has been exposed to crude oil as a whole, there are tests to determine if a person has been exposed to some individual crude oil related compounds. However, these medical tests are not specific to crude oil as exposure to crude oil-related compounds may occur for many individual during their normal activities.

What is being done to ensure the air is safe?
There are two methods of air testing underway. First, scientific instruments are being used to test the air 24 hours a day on beaches from Gaviota to Santa Barbara. Second, air samples are being collected for more detailed analysis from ten separate locations.
and being sent to a certified laboratory. Test results are being reviewed by trained scientists and public health officials.

Are the beaches and water being tested?
Yes, the water and beach sand are being tested for crude oil-associated compounds. After collection, the samples will be sent to an accredited laboratory for analysis. Testing results are being reviewed by trained scientists and public health officials as they are received.

What can we do to protect human health?
In order to limit exposure to crude, it is recommended that people avoid any contact with spilled oil. Only people who are trained and wearing appropriate personal protective equipment should be involved in any clean-up activities. People should not eat seafood from the affected area. In addition, it is best to stay away from areas when there is visible oil and a petroleum odor as inhalation, as inhalation of some crude oil related compounds may cause temporary discomfort for sensitive individuals.