



The Hidden Danger of Oily Rags

Old rags are often used for staining furniture, floors, decks, and other woodwork with oil-based stain solutions. Oily rags are also commonly found in automobile maintenance garages. Often times, employees toss their oily rags in a pile on the floor or dispose of them improperly. However, if oily rags are not stored or disposed of properly, they can auto-ignite and start a fire which could damage your business, home, and/or possessions.

How can a pile of oily rags sitting on your garage floor start a fire? As oily rags begin to dry, heat is produced. If they're thrown into a pile, oxygen is trapped underneath. The combination of heat, oxygen, and the cloth can lead to spontaneous combustion, which could result in a fire that could destroy your property.

Listed below are some tips for storing and disposing of oily rags:

- Never store oily rags in a pile. Used rags should be spread out in a safe, flat area to dry. Once they're dry, check with your city or municipality for proper disposal instructions.
- Store the rags in an airtight, non-combustible metal container. If you plan to use your rags later, this step is critical. The metal container should be filled with a solution of water and an oil breakdown detergent.
- Take the container to your local hazardous waste disposal center, or arrange a special pickup by your garbage pickup service. Many municipalities also host hazardous waste drop-off/pickup days.
- Never pour oily water down a drain in or around your home. Do not wash, recycle, or compost oily rags. Synthetic oil-based products are highly toxic. If washed or composted, the toxic chemicals will then be reintroduced into the environment.
- A clean work area can help prevent a fire from spreading and getting bigger by limiting the fire's fuel source.

Understanding the potential for the self-heating and spontaneous combustion of oily rags, and following the guidelines for proper disposal are key steps in fire prevention.

For more information regarding the proper disposal of oily rags, and other fire prevention guidelines, please contact Acadia's Virtual Loss Control Team at virtuallc@acadia-ins.com or 207-874-5701.

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