

NEXT

Need a swifter,
safer way to mop
up toxic waste?
Blue goo may do.


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Scouring radioactive waste usually means just that. Scrub with soap and water, pails and brushes. Repeat. If it sounds messy, it is—and dangerous too for those exposed to dust and contaminated wastewater.

Hawaii-based CBI Polymers says it's come up with a better way to clean up nuclear waste. The firm's blue goo may not look high-tech; all you do is pour it. But as the superabsorbent goo gels, its molecules act as a sponge, binding and encapsulating radioactive molecules. Peel the film off and you've got lightweight waste that can be rolled up and disposed of more cheaply and easily than vats of toxic water.

"It's the same concept as Silly Putty. It gets into every pore, nook, and cranny," says the Department of Energy's Hector Rodriguez, who used it to sop up beryllium, a hazardous metal, left over from weapons research at the National Energy Technology Laboratory in Oregon. The yearlong project cut the labor used in such efforts by 70 percent.

This year CBI donated 500 gallons to the nuclear cleanup in Japan, where it decontaminated 25,000 square feet of walls, sidewalks, and playgrounds. It's also good on toxic PCBs, asbestos, and heavy metals like mercury—on everything from battleships to power plants—as well as nonindustrial messes. That's heavy-duty work for such humble-looking goo.

—Gretchen Parker

Blue goo is mostly for big toxic surfaces but works on germy keyboards too. The more porous the object, the more you need.

