

Frequently Asked Questions – OHA Website

What are PFAS?

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS, describes a class of more than 4,000 chemical compounds that have been used since the 1940s for a wide range of consumer and industrial products. PFAS provide grease and water-resistance properties to clothing, shoes, and outerwear. They are also used in firefighting foam, electronics manufacturing, chrome-plating, paper manufacturing, and other consumer and industrial uses.

Why are PFAS a concern?

- PFAS are referred to as “forever chemicals,” meaning that when they contaminate soil or groundwater, they do not easily break down or degrade into a less harmful chemical form.
 - Unsafe storage, improper disposal, and inadequate containment of these chemicals has resulted in contamination of soil, waterways and groundwater supplies in some locations.
 - PFAS-contamination can migrate to groundwater and surface water supplies and affect the safety of drinking water.
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How did PFAS end up in our environment?

Industrial & Firefighting Uses

- In the United States, the most significant sources of known PFAS contamination are facilities that manufacture the chemicals and large military bases that conduct extensive firefighting training activities.
- Often chemical manufacturing facilities did not have adequate waste storage and disposal practices, which resulted in PFAS-contaminated soil, groundwater and surface water in certain locations.
- In the 1990s, scientists began identifying PFAS in people’s blood. Since then, studies began finding health effects related to exposure to high levels of the chemicals, such as near PFAS manufacturing plants, and military bases that conduct frequent firefighting training.
- In the 2000s, chemical manufacturers voluntarily phased out two commonly used PFAS compounds, perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), that were shown to be present in people and persistent in the environment. These were replaced with versions of PFAS thought to be less persistent and toxic.

Consumer Uses

- PFAS' water- and grease-resistant properties made it popular to use in consumer products.
 - **Examples of its use in products include:**
 - Water-repellant sprays for footwear, fabrics and outerwear
 - Stain-resistant carpets and nonstick cookware
 - Food packaging
 - Polishes, waxes, and cleaning products
 - When consumers use products that contain PFAS, the chemicals end up in landfills and wastewater treatment plants, where they can further contaminate groundwater and surface water.
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How are people exposed to PFAS?

Potential Exposure to PFAS in Contaminated Drinking Water

- Human exposures to high levels of PFAS have been documented in places near facilities known to manufacture PFAS chemicals and military bases with extensive firefighting training activities.
- High levels of PFAS in drinking water is the pathway of exposure of greatest concern. Researchers are still studying the extent to which this pathway impacts human health.

Other Methods of Exposure

- Eating food packaged in material that contains PFAS or consuming items that touch grease-resistant coatings, such as wrappers, to-go boxes, and pre-packaged microwaveable foods.
- Using some consumer products such as non-stick cookware, stain resistant carpeting, and water repellent clothing.
- Accidentally swallowing contaminated soil or dust.
- Some types of food sources can be affected by PFAS contamination:
 - **Plants:** Some plants, such as grasses, can absorb contamination when they are fertilized with PFAS-containing biosolids from wastewater treatment plants. This has resulted in cows producing contaminated milk in some dairy farms in the U.S.
 - **Fish:** There is also evidence that when surface water is contaminated, certain PFAS compounds can bioaccumulate in fish. Several states have issued fish advisories in bodies of water where fish have been affected by contamination.
- **Given how prevalent PFAS are in the environment, these chemicals are found in the blood of people and animals worldwide, and are present in a variety of food products**

and the environment. Researchers are still studying the extent of human exposure from these types of PFAS sources.

What is the scientific understanding of health risks from PFAS?

- Information about human health effects from certain PFAS chemicals primarily comes from studies of people with occupational exposure at work, people living near industrial facilities where PFAS were produced, and people exposed to contaminated drinking water.
 - Additional knowledge of health risks comes from animal studies that have documented multiple specific health effects in animals, including reproductive, developmental, liver, kidney and immunological effects.
 - **The research suggests that exposure to high levels of PFAS may:**
 - Affect growth, learning and behavior of infants and children.
 - Lower a woman's chance of getting pregnant.
 - Interfere with the body's hormones.
 - Increase cholesterol levels.
 - Affect the immune system.
 - Increase the risk of certain types of cancer (such as kidney and testicular cancer).
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Can I get tested for PFAS?

- If tested, most people in the U.S. would have PFAS measured in their blood. Since there are no health-based screening levels for specific PFAS, health care providers cannot interpret blood tests to say what the results mean for health. Tests cannot be used to diagnose if PFAS are the cause of adverse health effects.
 - Testing for PFAS exposure is not a routine clinical test. Testing blood for PFAS levels requires services of a specialized laboratory. It is unlikely that health insurance would cover the testing cost.
 - **More information:**
 - [Testing for PFAS](#)
 - [Screening for PFAS Levels in Your Blood](#)
 - [Talking to Your Doctor About Exposure to PFAS](#)
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What is Oregon Doing About PFAS?

- OHA's Drinking Water Services [emerging contaminants](#) and [PFAS](#) webpages outline their work to protect Oregonians from PFAS in their public drinking water.
- OHA Environmental Public Health is providing toxicological and health education support to DEQ and other partners who are working to understand and reduce potential PFAS-related exposures at specific sites and statewide.
- Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is working to protect residents from PFAS in several ways as described in these webpages:
 - [Department of Environmental Quality : Addressing PFAS in Oregon : Toxic Reduction and Safer Alternatives : State of Oregon](#)
 - [Department of Environmental Quality : PFAS 2025 : Adopted Rules : State of Oregon](#).
 - [Department of Environmental Quality : Foodware Containers and Polystyrene Foam : Production and Design : State of Oregon](#)
 - [Department of Environmental Quality: PFAS in Cleanup](#)

What are Other Government Agencies Doing?

- The federal government has taken several steps to address health risks from PFAS as outlined on the [EPA's PFAS webpage](#).