

**Mission:**

To protect, promote & improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county & community efforts.



**Ron DeSantis**  
Governor

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State Surgeon General

**Vision:** To be the **Healthiest State** in the Nation

## PER- AND POLYFLUOROALKYL SUBSTANCES (PFAS)

PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) are a group of man-made chemicals found in air, soil, ground and surface water, and in people around the world. Studies about health effects of PFAS exposure in humans and animals have not reached clear conclusions. However, results do suggest that certain PFAS may be related to specific health problems, so researchers continue to study them.

The purpose of this factsheet is to provide an overview of frequently asked questions regarding PFAS in the environment and their possible health effects, as well as regulatory guidance and biomonitoring information. ***\*Note: Questions discussed in this factsheet mainly focus on perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) as these are the most common and well-studied PFAS.***

### General

PFAS Regulation and Advisories

Biomonitoring and Blood Testing

Individual Concerns

## General Facts

### What are PFAS?

PFAS do not occur naturally in the environment. They are manufactured chemicals and have been used in:

- Surface protection of non-stick cookware.
- Stain resistant carpets and fabrics.
- Waterproof mattresses and clothing.
- Grease-resistant food packaging.
- Some firefighting materials.
- Photo imaging, metal plating, printers, and copy machines.

The most common and well-studied PFAS are perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS). Information needed for investigating PFAS such as toxicity values, screening levels and lifetime health advisory levels (HAL) as provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are only available for these two compounds.

### Why are PFAS a concern?

PFAS are widespread and global. Once released, they are very persistent in the environment and the human body. They can be found in:

- Air
- Soil
- Water (ground and surface water)
- Blood
- Urine
- Breast milk
- Umbilical cord blood

### How can I be exposed to PFAS?

The main way you can be exposed to PFAS is by swallowing them when you:

## FAQ - PER- AND POLYFLUOROALKYL SUBSTANCES (PFAS)

- Drink contaminated water.
- Eat fish caught from waters contaminated with PFAS.
- Eat food packed in PFAS-containing material (e.g., popcorn bags).
- Transfer them hand to mouth from surfaces treated with PFAS, such as carpets.

If you work with PFAS, you can also be exposed to them by breathing them in or through skin contact. The uptake of PFAS through skin contact is slow and not considered significant.

For infants and toddlers, hand-to-mouth is considered the most significant source of exposure.

### How long do PFAS remain in the body?

On average, PFAS can remain in the body between two and nine years.

### How can PFAS potentially affect health?

- Effects on health from exposure to low levels of PFAS are not well known. Studies in humans and animals are inconclusive but suggest that certain PFAS may cause health effects.
- Non-cancer effects appear more common and include:
  - Increased cholesterol levels
  - Impacts on human hormones
  - Impacts on human immune system
  - Fetal and infant developmental effects

### Can PFAS cause cancer?

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has determined there is **some** evidence that PFAS can cause cancer.
- The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified PFOA as **possibly** cancer causing, although, there is currently no consistent scientific evidence that PFOS and PFOA cause cancer in humans.
- Some animal studies have suggested a higher risk of certain cancers, such as prostate, kidney, or testicular cancer. Humans and animals often react differently to chemicals (including PFAS) and not all the effects seen in animal tests may occur in humans.
- Some increases in kidney, prostate, and testicular cancers have been seen in individuals exposed to higher PFAS levels, mostly in occupational exposures. Most of these exposures were in people who worked in, or lived near, PFAS manufacturing facilities.

### How certain are the studies that showed health risks?

- Correlations between exposure to PFAS and health effects have been inconsistent.
- More research is needed to fully understand any health effects in humans.
- Animals (mostly rats and mice) exposed to much higher levels than most people showed several health problems, such as liver damage, developmental and reproductive effects, and changes in hormone levels.
- Some human studies have found increases in prostate, kidney, and testicular cancers in workers exposed to PFAS and people living near facilities producing PFAS. However, other studies did not report a link between cancer and PFAS.

- Studies should be interpreted carefully, since the effects were not consistent across studies, there were contradictory findings among studies, and exposure levels were much higher than seen in the general population.

### PFAS Regulation and Advisories

#### What levels of PFAS in water are considered harmful?

- The EPA has developed a lifetime drinking water health advisory level (HAL) for PFOA and/ or PFOS of 70 ng/L. The level is equal to the amount of a shot glass (1.5 oz) in approximately 150 million gallons of water. Drinking water at or below this standard for a lifetime is not expected to harm your health.
- If testing shows that your drinking water contains PFOA and/ or PFOS above the EPA HAL, use other water sources for drinking, preparing food, cooking, brushing teeth, and other uses when you might swallow water. Because the HAL is based upon long-term exposure, a short-term increase above the HAL should not increase risk significantly.

### Biomonitoring and Blood Testing

#### Can a test determine whether I have been exposed to PFAS?

PFAS can be measured in blood, serum, and urine. However, doctors do not conduct this test to make a diagnosis or decide on treatment.

#### When is testing of PFAS useful and what can the results tell me?

- Testing for PFAS can be useful when they are part of a scientific investigation or a health study to determine how often and at what levels the chemical is found in the population. One such study is the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.
- Blood tests can be helpful when researching health effects from PFAS among persons who have been exposed to very high concentrations of the chemical, such as workers in industries where PFAS was used.
- Results of biomonitoring can compare the PFAS results from individuals tested with national averages established through these types of studies.

#### What can the results from blood testing for PFAS NOT tell me?

Most people in the United States (U.S.) will have measurable amounts of PFAS in their blood. We do not know how this impacts our health. These blood tests **will not**:

- Provide information to pinpoint whether PFAS caused a particular health problem or to decide on treatment.
- Predict or rule-out the development of future health problems related to a PFAS exposure.
- Identify how or where the PFAS exposure occurred.

#### What is currently known about PFAS blood levels in U.S. population?

- The National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals Report has reported that serum levels of PFAS appear to be higher in the U.S. than in some other countries.
- For the average American the PFAS level is 2,100 and 6,300 ng/L per liter of blood, respectively. The level is equal to the amount of 30 to 90 shot glasses (1.5 oz), respectively, in approximately 150 million gallons of water. These levels have been shown to be higher if a person's drinking

water source is contaminated with PFAS or if a person is exposed at a workplace that produces the PFAS product. More information can be found at: [https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/docs/ATSDR\\_PFAS\\_ClinicalGuidance\\_12202019.pdf](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/docs/ATSDR_PFAS_ClinicalGuidance_12202019.pdf) or at: <https://www.pehsu.net/>.

## Individual Concerns

### **If my drinking water is above the PFAS HAL, should my pets drink it?**

No. Pets should be given the same drinking water you drink. As with humans, if the drinking water contains PFAS contaminant levels above the EPA HAL, use alternative water sources.

### **I drank water that exceeded the HAL for PFAS while I was pregnant and lactating. What impact could it have on my child?**

- We do not have data to assess past risks to you and your family.
- Exposure to PFAS from drinking water with concentrations above the HAL may affect children's developmental health, including impaired growth, learning, and behavior.
- Studies in humans and animals are inconclusive and further, intense research is needed to know for sure about possible health effects related to duration and frequency of exposure.

### **We have tried to get pregnant for a long time without success. Could it be due to drinking water levels above the HAL for PFAS?**

Infertility can be caused by many factors, both natural and chemical. At this time, we don't know if exposure to PFAS in drinking water above the HAL can affect infertility.

### **If PFAS have been found in my soil and water, should I be concerned?**

While garden fruits and vegetables should be considered when evaluating the risk to exposure of PFAS, no data are currently available for Florida to evaluate possible risks. However, the Florida Department of Health would consider evaluation when data become available.

### **Can I water my lawn with water containing PFAS?**

- Watering a lawn with non-edible plants and grass poses little risk.
- PFAS (PFOA and PFOS) are not absorbed effectively through the skin, nor is inhalation of vapors from water with PFAS likely to cause health problems.
- Remember that some well water specifically used for lawn maintenance only is usually not to be used for drinking purposes. For this chemical, drinking is a main route of exposure.

### **Can I use reuse water for watering my home produce?**

No. Reuse water should never be used for home-grown produce due to the concern for human microbial pathogens. Reuse water should also not be used for drinking.

### **Can I swim in my pool if it is contaminated with PFAS?**

Skin contact with and breathing PFAS (PFOA and PFOS) are minor concerns because these exposures are either uncommon or very low. You can drain and replace pool water with clean water from a different source. However, if you are careful to avoid swallowing pool water which is always a good practice, the risk of exposure to PFAS from swimming should be very low.

**References:**

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*If you have questions or comments about this factsheet, we encourage you to contact us.*

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