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# Basic Information on PFAS

## What are PFAS?

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a group of man-made chemicals that includes PFOA, PFOS, GenX, and many other chemicals. PFAS have been manufactured and used in a variety of industries around the globe, including in the United States since the 1940s. PFOA and PFOS have been the most extensively produced and studied of these chemicals. Both chemicals are very persistent in the environment and in the human body – meaning they don't break down and they can accumulate over time. There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse human health effects.

PFAS can be found in:

- **Food** packaged in PFAS-containing materials, processed with equipment that used PFAS, or grown in PFAS-contaminated soil or water.

- **Commercial household products**, including stain- and water-repellent fabrics, nonstick products (e.g., Teflon), polishes, waxes, paints, cleaning products, and fire-fighting foams (a major source of groundwater contamination at airports and military bases where firefighting training occurs).
- **Workplace**, including production facilities or industries (e.g., chrome plating, electronics manufacturing or oil recovery) that use PFAS.
- **Drinking water**, typically localized and associated with a specific facility (e.g., manufacturer, landfill, wastewater treatment plant, firefighter training facility).
- **Living organisms**, including fish, animals and humans, where PFAS have the ability to build up and persist over time.

Certain PFAS chemicals are no longer manufactured in the United States as a result of phase outs including the PFOA Stewardship Program in which eight major chemical manufacturers agreed to eliminate the use of PFOA and PFOA-related chemicals in their products and as emissions from their facilities. Although PFOA and PFOS are no longer manufactured in the United States, they are still produced internationally and can be imported into the United States in consumer goods such as carpet, leather and apparel, textiles, paper and packaging, coatings, rubber and plastics.

## Why are PFAS important?

PFAS are found in a wide range of consumer products that people use daily such as cookware, pizza boxes and stain repellants. Most people have been exposed to PFAS. Certain PFAS can accumulate and stay in the human body for long periods of time. There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse health outcomes in humans. The most-studied PFAS chemicals are PFOA and PFOS. Studies indicate that PFOA and PFOS can cause reproductive and developmental, liver and kidney, and immunological effects in laboratory animals. Both chemicals have caused tumors in animals. The most consistent findings are increased cholesterol levels among exposed populations, with more limited findings related to:

- low infant birth weights,

- effects on the immune system,
- cancer (for PFOA), and
- thyroid hormone disruption (for PFOS).

## What is the difference between PFOA, PFOS and GenX and other replacement PFAS?

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a group of man-made chemicals that have been in use since the 1940s, and are (or have been) found in many consumer products like cookware, food packaging, and stain repellants. PFAS manufacturing and processing facilities, airports, and military installations that use firefighting foams are some of the main sources of PFAS. PFAS may be released into the air, soil, and water, including sources of drinking water. PFOA and PFOS are the most studied PFAS chemicals and have been voluntarily phased out by industry, though they are still persistent in the environment. There are many other PFAS, including GenX chemicals and PFBS in use throughout our economy.

GenX is a trade name for a technology that is used to make high performance fluoropolymers (e.g., some nonstick coatings) without the use of perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). HFPO dimer acid and its ammonium salt are the major chemicals associated with the GenX technology. GenX chemicals have been found in surface water, groundwater, finished drinking water, rainwater, and air emissions in some areas.

As part of EPA's draft toxicity assessment, the agency has developed draft oral reference doses (RfDs) for GenX chemicals and PFBS. [Learn more about EPA's draft toxicity assessment on GenX.](#)

## How are people exposed to PFAS?

There are a variety of ways that people can be exposed to these chemicals and at different levels of exposure. For example, people can be exposed to low levels of PFAS through *food*, which can become contaminated through:

- Contaminated soil and water used to grow the food,
- Food packaging containing PFAS, and
- Equipment that used PFAS during food processing.

People can also be exposed to PFAS chemicals if they are released during normal *use, biodegradation, or disposal of consumer products* that contain PFAS. People may be exposed to PFAS used in commercially-treated products to make them stain- and water-repellent or nonstick. These goods include carpets, leather and apparel, textiles, paper and packaging materials, and non-stick cookware.

People who *work* at PFAS production facilities, or facilities that manufacture goods made with PFAS, may be exposed in certain occupational settings or through contaminated air.

*Drinking water* can be a source of exposure in communities where these chemicals have contaminated water supplies. Such contamination is typically localized and associated with a specific facility, for example,

- an industrial facility where PFAS were produced or used to manufacture other products, or
- an oil refinery, airfield or other location at which PFAS were used for firefighting.

PFOA, PFOS, and GenX have been found in a number of drinking water systems due to localized contamination. You can view more information about exposures to PFAS through drinking water on our [Drinking Water Health Advisories for PFOA and PFOS](#) page.

## **Are there health effects from PFAS?**

There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse health outcomes in humans. If humans, or animals, ingest PFAS (by eating or drinking food or water than contain PFAS), the PFAS are absorbed, and can accumulate in the body. PFAS stay in the human body for long periods

of time. As a result, as people get exposed to PFAS from different sources over time, the level of PFAS in their bodies may increase to the point where they suffer from adverse health effects.

Studies indicate that PFOA and PFOS can cause reproductive and developmental, liver and kidney, and immunological effects in laboratory animals. Both chemicals have caused tumors in animal studies. The most consistent findings from human epidemiology studies are increased cholesterol levels among exposed populations, with more limited findings related to:

- infant birth weights,
- effects on the immune system,
- cancer (for PFOA), and
- thyroid hormone disruption (for PFOS).

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