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Addressing Patient Questions About PFAS and Health

Health care providers may hear more questions about the health effects of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS, in the months and years ahead as the public health and medical communities learn more about the health impact of these chemicals. Some patients who drink water from private wells may have questions because they learn about the presence of PFAS in their well water, and others may have questions prompted by increased national attention to this issue.

The purpose of this advisory is to provide information to help you respond to patient questions regarding PFAS. If you have additional questions regarding patient health and PFAS, please contact Dr. Rick Rosen at the contact details above.

What are PFAS?

PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a group of human-made chemicals, including perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and polyfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), that have been used in industry and consumer products worldwide for many years. While it is difficult to show that PFAS directly cause health conditions, [CDC reports](#) that exposure to some PFAS in the environment may be linked to harmful health effects in humans and animals.

PFAS do not break down naturally and can accumulate over time. People can be exposed to PFAS in a variety of ways, such as through food, water, dust in homes or consumer products such as non-stick cookware, stain resistant carpets, cosmetics, firefighting foams, and more. Most significant exposures to PFAS come from drinking water or eating food contaminated with PFAS. Scientific data shows that most Americans have some level of PFAS in their blood. Research is ongoing to better understand the health effects of PFAS exposure.

Why now?

Health care providers may increasingly be asked about the individual health effects of PFAS as this topic becomes more prominent in the public dialogue. The White House recently [announced](#) a plan to combat PFAS pollution, including a [PFAS Roadmap](#) and new drinking water lifetime health advisories from the EPA. In California, including SLO County, the State Water Resources Control Board is requiring testing for PFAS at some private water wells around landfills, wastewater treatment plants, airports and other types of industrial operations. Residents who rely on private well water may decide to test for PFAS along with other contaminants.

Patients may have questions or concerns about PFAS because they have received test results showing the presence of PFAS in their well water or because they are learning more about the issue through increasing national attention and public discussion.

Guidance and FAQs for Clinicians

Resources are available to support your conversations with patients regarding PFAS and health. These include:

- **PFAS and Health in SLO County:** This local resource is available at slocounty.ca.gov/pfas and is attached to this advisory. If you would like printed copies for your patients, please send your request to publichealth.contact@co.slo.ca.us.
- **CDC Overview of the Science and Guidance for Clinicians on Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances:** This detailed document is available at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/docs/clinical-guidance-12-20-2019.pdf. It was updated in 2019 and remains CDC's most comprehensive PFAS publication for health care providers. For updates, see www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas.
- **American Academy of Pediatrics Q&A on PFAS Exposure for Children:** This resource for parents is available at www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/all-around/Pages/Limiting-Childrens-Exposure-to-Forever-Chemicals.aspx.

Laboratory Information

Two general types of laboratory tests are available to measure levels of certain PFAS compounds:

- **Environmental Water Tests:** These tests measure levels of PFAS in water and may be useful for well owners. For a list of available tests and laboratories to process specimens, see slocounty.ca.gov/wells or www.waterboards.ca.gov/pfas/docs/pfas-laboratories.pdf.
- **Blood tests:** A blood test can show the levels of specific PFAS in the body at the time of the test, although there is not currently established guidance about the interpretation of these results. Testing is most often used for large-scale surveillance rather than diagnosis. If you determine that a blood test would be useful for your patients, the commercial laboratory Quest Diagnostics [provides a test for PFOA](#). For more information on blood testing for PFAS, see CDC: www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/health-effects/blood-testing.html.

Resources

For more information about PFAS from local, state, and national agencies:

- County of San Luis Obispo: [Slocounty.ca.gov/PFAS](https://slocounty.ca.gov/PFAS)
- California State Water Resources Control Board: Waterboards.ca.gov/pfas
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Epa.gov/pfas
- U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA): Fda.gov/food/chemical-contaminants-food/and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances-pfas
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC): Atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas



PFAS and Health in SLO County

PFAS (Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a group of chemicals that have been used in industry and consumer products worldwide for many years. PFAS are persistent in the environment, meaning they do not break down naturally and can accumulate over time.

People can be exposed to PFAS in a variety of ways, such as through food, water, dust in homes or consumer products such as non-stick cookware, stain resistant carpets, cosmetics, firefighting foams, and more. Most significant exposures to PFAS come from drinking water or eating food contaminated with PFAS. Scientific data shows that most Americans have some level of PFAS in their blood.

While it is difficult to show that PFAS directly cause health conditions in humans, CDC reports that exposure to some PFAS in the environment may be linked to harmful health effects in humans and animals. More research is ongoing to better understand the health effects of PFAS exposure.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are possible health effects of PFAS?

[According to the CDC](#), research involving humans suggests that high levels of certain PFAS may contribute to health effects including increased cholesterol levels, changes in liver enzymes, decreased vaccine response in children, increased risk of high blood pressure or pre-eclampsia in pregnant women, small decreases in infant birth weights, and increased risk of kidney or testicular cancer. The types of health problems that may be associated with PFAS may also be caused by a variety of other factors, making it difficult to determine if PFAS exposure has caused or worsened a health problem. Researchers continue to evaluate the potential health risks from PFAS exposure, so we may know more in the future.

If my family has been exposed to PFAS, will it harm our health in the future?

[According to CDC](#), we don't know if exposure to PFAS may cause health problems in the future. If you have been exposed to high levels of PFAS, you can ask your doctor if you need to be monitored for symptoms or conditions that may be caused by PFAS exposure. Your doctor may watch for symptoms and investigate if necessary. If signs or symptoms of illness do occur, your doctor will not know if those are related to PFAS but will be able to provide the care you need based on your signs and symptoms.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a [helpful Q&A on PFAS exposure for children](#). Your pediatrician can also answer specific questions about your child's health.

Should I get a blood test for PFAS?

Most people in the U.S. have PFAS in their blood. While a blood test can show the levels of specific PFAS in your body at the time you were tested, this test is generally not used for medical purposes. It will not show whether an illness was caused by PFAS, and it cannot predict or rule out future health problems. Your doctor can talk with you about whether they recommend a blood test.

Is there a way to remove PFAS from my body?

No, there is not currently a medical treatment to remove PFAS from the body. Some PFAS leave the body slowly over time, mostly through urine. The most effective step is to reduce your exposure going forward.

What can I do to reduce my risk?

The most effective way to reduce your risk is to limit future exposure to PFAS. You can avoid consuming water or food with high levels of PFAS and may take steps to avoid consumer products with PFAS. Stay informed as new information becomes available, keep up with routine check-ups and screenings, and talk with your physician or a public health nurse if you have specific health concerns. Resources from local, state, and federal agencies are available on page 3.

I get my drinking water from a well—how do I know if it's safe?

The water quality from private (non-commercial) wells is not regulated or routinely monitored by any outside agency or company. It is the responsibility of the private well owner to ensure that their well water is safe. It is a good idea to consider testing your drinking water as a precaution.

If you are concerned about PFAS in your water, you may consider a filter that can reduce the amounts of PFAS in your drinking and cooking water. [According to EPA](#), studies have shown that only a negligible amount of PFAS can get into your body through your skin. Therefore, showering, bathing, and washing dishes in water containing PFAS are unlikely to significantly increase your risk.

For more information about water filtration for PFAS, see [guidance from NSF](#). For more information for safely maintaining your well, see slocounty.ca.gov/wells and WellOwner.org.

Can I breastfeed my baby if I've been exposed to PFAS in drinking water?

[According to CDC](#), nursing mothers should continue to breastfeed, as the benefits of breastfeeding to mothers and infants outweighs the potential risks from PFAS. While there is much we do not know about the health effects of exposure to PFAS in breast milk, we do know that the benefits of breastfeeding are well documented. [Learn more from CDC about PFAS and breastfeeding](#). If you have concerns, it is a good idea to talk with your doctor or your baby's pediatrician.

What can I do to protect my family's health in a world where PFAS are prevalent?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle that limits overall health risks is the most important step for staying healthy. Regardless of PFAS exposure, health and medical advisors encourage all of us to eat as healthfully as possible, be physically active every day, reduce exposure to risks, and keep up with routine physical check-ups and screenings with your doctor. These routine check-ups and screenings are important to identify any emerging health problems, including problems that may be related to PFAS, and connect you with appropriate care. In addition, you can reduce your future exposure to PFAS (see more tips above) and talk with your doctor about whether they recommend any additional screenings.

Resources

For more information about PFAS and what agencies are doing to address PFAS and health:

- **County of San Luis Obispo:** Slocounty.ca.gov/PFAS
- **California State Water Resources Control Board:** Waterboards.ca.gov/pfas
- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):** Epa.gov/pfas
- **U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA):**
Fda.gov/food/chemical-contaminants-food/and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances-pfas
- **U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC):** Atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas

Contact Us

For questions related to PFAS and health in San Luis Obispo County, please contact the Public Health Department at 805-781-5500 or publichealth.contact@co.slo.ca.us.

For questions related to construction and maintenance of a water well in San Luis Obispo County, please contact Environmental Health Services at 805-781-5544 or ehs@co.slo.ca.us.

Information is also available on the Environmental Health Services website to assist private well owners with routine maintenance of water well systems:

[Private Well Owner Resources - County of San Luis Obispo \(ca.gov\)](#).