

PFAS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In addition to the information listed below, concerned consumers may also visit www.safewatermass.org or email the Attleboro Water Department at water1@cityofattleboro.us for more information.

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.

HEALTH

Q: I have a pre-existing medical condition. Can I drink the water?

When a water source contains PFAS6 at levels above 20 ppt., the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection recommends consumers in a sensitive subgroup (pregnant or nursing women, infants and people diagnosed by their health care provider to have a compromised immune system), are advised not to consume, drink, or cook with water when the level of PFAS6 is above 20 ppt. However, our water meets the state standard. Testing shows PFAS6 levels are below 20 ppt.

Q: What health effects does PFAS have on humans?

At present, not enough research has been conducted to give us a definitive answer. Having said that, MassDEP recommends pregnant or nursing women, infants and people diagnosed by their health care provider to have a compromised immune system not consume water with PFAS6 levels above 20 ppt. MassDEP states consuming water with PFAS above the drinking water standard does not mean that adverse effects will occur, and that the degree of risk depends on the level of chemicals and the duration of exposure.

There are scientific studies that suggest potential links between exposure to certain PFAS in the environment and health effects. The studies have looked at the effects on the development of fetuses and infants, the thyroid, the liver, kidneys, hormone levels and the immune system, as well as if a cancer risk exists for people exposed to levels well above the drinking water standard.

Follow-up: MassDEP and CDC both note more research is needed and is ongoing, and it is important to remember that consuming water with high PFAS6 levels does not mean adverse effects will occur. As we await further scientific study, MassDEP has acted to set a drinking water standard, and

we are working in the best interest of our consumers to lower PFAS6 levels below 20 ppt.

Follow-up: There have not been experiments on human exposure because it would be unethical to expose human subjects to PFAS levels to study the impact.

Follow-up: For contaminants like lead or arsenic, science has proven they are a threat to human health, and we test for those contaminants. There is not the same conclusive evidence for PFAS.

Follow-up: MassDEP points out that “It is important to note that consuming water with PFAS6 above the drinking water standard does not mean that adverse effects will occur. As noted, the degree of risk depends on the level of the chemicals and the duration of exposure. The drinking water standard assumes that individuals drink only contaminated water, which typically overestimates exposure, and that they are also exposed to PFAS6 from sources beyond drinking water, such as food.”

Q: Does it cause cancer?

Maybe. The MassDEP’s consumer fact sheet states: “Some studies suggest a cancer risk may exist following long-term exposures to elevated levels of some of these compounds.” Source: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massdep-fact-sheet-pfas-in-drinking-water-questions-and-answers-for-consumers/download>

Specifically, the CDC says, “research involving humans suggests that high levels of certain PFAS may lead to ... increased risk of kidney or testicular cancer.” Source: <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/health-effects/talk-to-your-doctor.html>

Q: How much PFAS do I need to be exposed to before I have health impacts?

The maximum level (20 ppt for the sum of six specific PFAS) is set to protect against adverse health effects for all people consuming the water for a lifetime. It also applies to exposure of weeks to months for pregnancy and breast-feeding, according to Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP).

In the United States and other industrialized countries, most people have concentrations of these chemicals in their blood as food and consumer products are sources of exposure. The good news is the levels have been dropping as the certain PFAS are discontinued. A 2015-2016 federal study found an 82% drop in PFOS and 70% drop in PFOA (both members of the PFAS chemical group) in the general population, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Q: Why can’t I get a yes or no question on if PFAS is bad for my health?

Unfortunately, there is no clear answer. There is ongoing discussion and research within the scientific community. According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health “*Drinking water at a level above MassDEP’s MCL does not necessarily mean*

that health risks are expected. This is because the MCL is based on a level that is safe to drink for an entire lifetime. By convention, a value such as the MCL is designed to overestimate exposure and ensure that sensitive individuals are protected. For example, the MCL assumes that individuals drink only contaminated water and are also exposed to PFAS from sources beyond drinking water, such as food. Several safety factors are additionally applied to account for the differences between animals and humans and the differences from one human to another human. Under this scenario, a risk would be expected only if an individual continuously drinks only contaminated water at a level significantly higher than the MCL.” <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/per-and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances-pfas-in-drinking-water>

Follow-up: Without conclusive scientific findings, but with some studies done on laboratory animals that suggest the potential for harm to humans, the regulators at the MassDEP are erring on the side of public health.

Follow-up: In 2018, reviewing and summarizing the evidence from hundreds of scientific studies on PFAS, The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) concluded, “The available human studies have identified some potential targets of toxicity; however, cause and effect relationships have not been established for any of the effects, and the effects have not been consistently found in all studies.”

Follow-up: More information is available on www.safewatermass.org, including links to state and federal websites with information on the science and recommendations

Q: If the water is safe now, how long may I have been exposed to PFAS before now?

Relatively recent advances in laboratory testing now enable us to test for PFAS compounds at extremely low levels. Water systems that tested negative for PFAS at parts per billion may now test positive at parts per trillion. However, these tests do not tell us when the PFAS entered the water source or from where. This issue continues to develop and there is much we still do not know with certainty, but as we learn new information, we will share it with you.

Q: How often is the water tested and where are the results posted?

The Attleboro Water Department began testing voluntarily in September 2020. The water will continue to be tested regularly to ensure it meets state standards and results posted annually in the consumer confidence report, as well as on the City website at www.cityofattleboro.us.

Q: Do I need to seek medical attention?

If you are concerned, please contact your medical provider.

Q: Is there a test to check human levels? Should I get one?

If you are concerned, please contact your medical provider.

Q: Is it safe to use my water for bathing, cleaning, laundry, and dishwashing?

From the MassDEP Fact Sheets:

- “Because PFAS are not well absorbed through the skin, routine showering or bathing are not a significant concern unless PFAS6 levels are very high. Shorter showers or baths, especially for children who may swallow water while playing in the bath, or for people with severe skin conditions (e.g. significant rashes) would limit any absorption from the water. Based on information from the Connecticut Department of Health, which is the only State to have issued guidance on this issue, water should not be used, long-term, for showering and bathing if the PFAS6 level exceeds 210 ppt,” which the water provided by the Attleboro Water Department does not.
- “In most situations the water can be safely used for washing and rinsing foods and washing dishes.”
- “For washing items that might go directly into your mouth, like dentures and pacifiers, only a small amount of water might be swallowed and the risk of experiencing adverse health effects is very low.”
- “The water can be safely used by adults and older children for brushing teeth. However, use of bottled water should be considered for young children as they may swallow more water than adults when they brush their teeth. If you are concerned about your exposure, even though the risk is very low, you could use bottled water for these activities.”

(Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

Q: Is it safe for my pets to drink the water?

The MassDEP advises:

- “For pets or companion animals, the health effects and levels of concern to mammalian species, like dogs, cats and farm animals, are likely to be similar to those for people.”
- “As a precaution, if you have elevated levels of PFAS6 in your water, you may wish to consider using alternative water for your pets.”

If you have concerns, you may also want to consult with your veterinarian.

(Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

Q: Can I eat produce from my garden that was watered with PFAS-contaminated water?

The MassDEP advises: “Since people eat a variety of foods, the risk from the occasional consumption of produce grown in soil or irrigated with water contaminated with PFAS6 is likely to be low. Families who grow a large fraction of their produce would experience higher potential exposures and should consider the following steps, which should help reduce PFAS6 exposures from gardening:

- Maximize use of rainwater or water from another safe source for your garden.
- Wash your produce in clean water after you harvest it.
- Enhance your soil with clean compost rich in organic matter, which has

- been reported to reduce PFAS uptake into plants.
- Use raised beds with clean soil.”

(Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

REGULATIONS AND TESTING

Q: How do I know the water coming into my house has the same PFAS levels as at the location where you test it? I tested the water from my faucet and the PFAS levels came back higher than your test results, how come?

The regulators and industry believe the highest levels of PFAS will be found at the treatment plant and water sources prior to distribution to homes. Our focus is on ensuring the systemwide levels meet the state standards which gives us the greatest likelihood to lower or eliminate the amount of PFAS6 in the overall system.

There could be factors in a home that result in higher levels, but it is not possible for water suppliers to address this issue on a home-by-home basis.

No one has all the information, and we are going to try to provide the best information we have based on the best available knowledge.

Q: Why are we just hearing about this now?

In October 2020, MassDEP adopted a new standard for PFAS levels – the sum of six specific compounds may not exceed 20 parts per trillion. As a result of the new standard, we conducted testing that indicated detectable levels of PFAS6 that do not exceed the state standard. We are taking immediate steps to reduce the PFAS levels further.

Relatively recent advances in laboratory testing now enable tests for PFAS compounds at extremely low levels. Water systems that tested negative for PFAS at parts per billion may now test positive at parts per trillion. However, these tests do not tell us when the PFAS entered the water source or from where. This issue continues to develop and there is much we still do not know with certainty, but as we learn new information, we will share it with you.

The testing process takes time. After samples are carefully collected, it can take weeks or even a month to receive the laboratory results. The testing may then have to be done again to confirm the initial results, and only after those results are learned will the public be notified. At all times, we are working closely with the MassDEP to analyze the test results and determine the appropriate time to notify the public.

Q: How did you let this happen?

The PFAS in the water supply is the result of pollution sources beyond our control and is not the result of any actions by the water supply. As soon as we became aware of the presence of PFAS6, we took steps to address the issue.

We are committed to providing safe and reliable water. We regularly test and treat or filter, as necessary. We also work to protect the sources of our water.

Unfortunately, PFAS is very prevalent in household products and manufacturing, and we are looking to determine how it arrived in this water source. Working with MassDEP, we will be the ones who determine the best solution to this problem and implement it.

Q: What is the Attleboro Water Department doing about PFAS?

We are committed to taking all necessary steps to meet the state standards. The Attleboro Water Department is currently under contract with Tata & Howard to pilot study new treatment techniques in order to reduce the PFAS levels in the drinking water. Once piloting is complete, there will be a design and construction phase before the new treatment can be implemented. This process is estimated to take about 2 years.

Q: Who is paying for this? Will my water rates go up?

There is a cost to delivering safe and clean water to our consumers. It is possible the PFAS6 issue will cause an increase in rates, depending on the solution to the problem. City water continues to be less expensive than bottled water and has many more stringent regulations than bottled water.

SOURCES

Q: Are you working to find the source of the pollution and hold the polluter accountable for the cost of removing the PFAS?

We are working with the MassDEP to identify the source of the pollution. It is important to note it may not always be possible to identify the source and hold them accountable for the financial impact on the water supplier.

Q: What if I have my own well?

For private well owners, you may want to contact your local Board of Health or Town government. For water testing for PFAS compounds, MassDEP recommends the use of a state “Approved” or certified analytical laboratory. A searchable list of MassDEP certified labs can be found at:

<http://eeaonline.eea.state.ma.us/DEP/Labcert/Labcert.aspx>

Because PFAS is in so many consumer products, you should be aware that sampling for PFAS must follow strict protocols so that you do not accidentally contaminate the sample.

(Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

The cost of the test can range \$200-\$400

SOLUTIONS

Q: Will Attleboro provide bottled water or reimburse consumers for bottled water?

No. The Attleboro Water Department does not foresee providing bottled water to consumers at this time. This option is adopted by some communities because it made sense in those communities. The decisions made here are ones that consider all the factors and what makes sense for the community.

Q: Is bottled water better?

Not necessarily. “The best way to know if the bottled water you are drinking or plan to drink has been tested for PFAS is to contact the bottler and ask for the latest testing results. Contact information should be available on the bottle or you may need to search the internet.” (Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

Q: Will boiling water get rid of PFAS?

“Boiling water will not destroy these chemicals and will increase their levels somewhat due to water evaporation.”

(Source: MassDEP fact sheet)

Q: Is there a product I can buy to filter out the PFAS?

There are home water treatment filters capable of removing some PFAS from drinking water for the countertop or under the sink.

MassDEP recommends: “If you chose to install a filter, you should check to see if the manufacturer has monitoring results demonstrating that the device can reduce PFAS to below your level of concern.” <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/per-and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances-pfas#bottled-water-and-home-water-filters->