PFAS IN DRINKING WATER

Westfield Residents Advocating for Themselves | Toxics Action Center

PFAS in Westfield

Firefighting foam containing PFAS was used in fire training exercises on the Barnes Air National Guard Base from approx. 1950-1987. The base lies above the Barnes Aquifer, which supplies much of Westfield's drinking water supply. The Air National Guard is currently undergoing an investigation into the details and extent of this groundwater contamination from the base.

Public Water

In 2013 the the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) advised communities with military sites near aquifers to test for these contaminants. Then in May 2016 the EPA lowered the health advisory level for PFAS in drinking water from 400 parts per trillion (ppt) of PFOA and 200ppt for PFOS to a combined total limit of 70ppt. (Ppt is sometimes written as micrograms per liter or µg/L.) *This raised a huge flag about the dangers of PFAS.* At that time, half of the public wells in Westfield tested high for PFAS (wells 1, 2, 7, and 8). The City took wells 7 and 8 offline and they are currently planning to install a filtration system for those wells. Much is unknown about the current water conditions at well 1 and 2.

What are PFAS?

Polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a large group of man-made toxic chemicals. PFAS are used to make consumer products resistant to water, grease or stains, including Gore-Tex rain gear, Teflon no-stick cookware, and Scotchguard stain-repellent for carpets or furniture fabric. PFAS have also been used in firefighting foams. Two of the chemicals in the PFAS family that were the most commonly used and produced are perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA, also referred to as C8) and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS). Sometimes you may still see informational materials using the term "PFC" instead of PFAS.

PFAS do not break down easily in the environment. The EPA and the PFAS industry launched the PFOA Stewardship Program in 2006 to work toward fully ending the production of PFOA and other PFAS in the US.

How can PFAS affect my health?

PFAS bioaccumulate, or build up, in the blood and organs of exposed humans and animals and remain there for many years. Research has shown that PFAS exposure may:

- increase the risk of cancer, thyroid disease, and ulcerative colitis
- affect the immune system, kidney function, and liver function
- increase cholesterol levels
- interfere with the body's natural hormones
- lower a woman's chance of getting pregnant, and
- affect growth, learning, and behavior of infants and older children.

Private Wells

In March 2017 MassDEP began an investigation of PFAS levels in Westfield's private drinking water wells. As of October, 57 samples have been taken. Three samples from three different residences on Lower Sandy Hill Road show alarmingly high PFAS levels of 141ppt, 787ppt, and 864ppt respectively. Further investigation is needed, so that all private well owners can have clean water.

PFAS Nationally

PFAS are referred to as an "emerging contaminant", meaning that the health impacts of these compounds have not been studied as rigorously as more common contaminants (like lead, arsenic, etc.). Yet millions of people are exposed to this contaminant in the US alone. The US government has responded by proposing a spending bill that will require the Department of Defense to conduct a nationwide health study of PFAS contamination at military sites and the health impacts for those exposed. This study will expand our understanding of PFAS and how they affect the human body. And, ultimately, how they affect the residents of Westfield!

What can I do?

If you are on private well water, you can contact Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) for more information on how you can test for PFAS. If you are on a public water supply, keep informed on the Westfield health advisory notices.

Contaminated water can be treated by at-home water filters only if they are specifically designed to capture PFAS, and many store-bought filters are not. The best way to ensure that your water is PFAS-free is to get your water supplier to install a point-of-entry treatment system and test the water quality regularly.

Many communities exposed to PFAS contamination in their drinking water have responded by getting their City and State health departments to offer blood testing or biomonitoring. You can connect with the local community group Westfield Residents Advocating for Themselves (also known as WRAFT), which is part of the National PFAS Contamination Coalition, and join in WRAFT's efforts to get much needed health information to the residents of Westfield.

Resources

- Westfield Health Department and Westfield Water Resources Department
- Barnes Aquifer Protection Advisory Committee
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection

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