

THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



Phasing Out PFAS

Have you heard about PFAS (“PEA-fass”)? This is a group of thousands of toxic chemicals that are in products throughout our lives, including food and water, and unlabelled. They’re also estimated to be in nearly every American’s body.

The good news, though, is that positive action is being taken to address these fluorinated chemicals as a class. This could reduce or eliminate our shared exposure to larger numbers of toxics more quickly, and with more efficient use of our collective time and energy.

This would push back against the too-common pattern with chemicals. They’re introduced with insufficient testing. There’s evidence of harm, but decades of inaction. It takes years to eliminate one chemical, then industry just swaps in a similar one. And our injuries and cleanup costs continue.

I’m so grateful to the activists, nonprofits, and legislators working for something better for us!

And our help is needed to empower their work and create better outcomes. What’s happening and how can you help? Read on!

What Are PFAS Chemicals?

Accidentally created in the 1930s, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) offer appealing qualities of resisting oil, water, and heat. **Today they can be used in** nonstick pans, stain repellent carpets, water repellent clothing, bedding, tablecloths, body care products,

and so much more. They can even be in **food packaging lining**, where they can transfer onto food.

Unfortunately, though, PFAS have been linked to serious health issues, including cancer, hormone disruption, liver damage, thyroid disease, decreased immunity, and birth defects. They can be harmful at extremely low levels. **Some experts say that PFAS are simply toxic to humans**, at any level.

Plus these “forever” chemicals never break down. A study found that they can’t be effectively contained or destroyed by landfill, burning, or wastewater treatment.

Instead they bioaccumulate in our water, soil, food, and bodies. They’ve been shown to travel many miles from their original disposal site — and been found at dangerous levels as far away as the North Pole!

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), **PFAS chemicals contaminate the blood of virtually all Americans.** They’re also in every American woman’s breast milk tested, at levels 2,000 times higher than the maximum some advise for drinking water.

So, to stop this contamination of our lives, **some call for PFAS to only be used for the most essential applications**, where realistic alternatives don’t yet exist.

“An estimated 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, yet manufacturers continue to use unnecessary and toxic PFAS chemicals,” says Nancy Buermeyer of Breast Cancer Prevention Partners (bcpp.org).

Local Toxics Disposal

■ **The next Sebastopol Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Collection Events are Tues. April 4 and Sept 19**, 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, at least 24 hours ahead, call 707/795-2025 or 877/747-1870. Or go to www.bit.ly/3S1uukW. Or email toxicsdisposal@cleanharbors.com.

■ **You can also make an appointment at a different town’s Collection Event.** Or drop items at the HHW Facility.

■ **For more about local toxics disposal**, see www.zerowastesonoma.gov or call 707/565-3375.

The Path to Solution

So how can you avoid PFAS? **Unfortunately, most products with PFAS aren’t labelled so.**

You can see some general shopping tips here: www.bit.ly/3EcQGcN. Also, **see my tips for buying nonstick cookware** in the *STEP Index* under **Cookware**. (TIP: Get pans free of PFOA and PTFE!)

And you can look for products that are labelled as not having PFAS, and learn the different chemical names in various product types.

But, Laurel Schaidler, Senior Scientist at Silent Spring Institute, says, **“We can’t rely on consumers to shop their way out of this challenge.”** (www.bit.ly/3YUiyDO)

That’s because we’re still exposed in so many products and other routes. **It’s much more effective to stop toxic exposure at the source. And so the best way to protect ourselves on this is to support community-level actions.**

And there are wonderful actions to support right now. After years of work by groups and states (including pioneering work by California state), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is actually taking action on this issue. **Let’s show them that we want strong protections, and quickly!**

See **PFAS**, over



PFAS, continued

Current Action Highlights

Here's **some of what's being done**, grouped by key categories.

Note: These are just some of the PFAS categories, and many of these actions have exceptions. **So we still need broader action!**

■ **Firefighter foam.** In 2020, **California** banned most uses of PFAS-based firefighting foam, starting in 2022. This protects firefighters, water supplies, and all of us. Occupational cancer is the leading cause of firefighter deaths, says the International Association of Fire Fighters. Alternatives are viable, in-use, effective, cost-saving, and certified. (*STEP issue XX/6*) At that time, **four other states had similar bans, and some airports had stopped its use.** The **U.S. Department of Defense** is mandated to largely stop using it by 2024. (www.bit.ly/3lD5qof)

■ **Safer food and cookware.** In 2021, **California** banned PFAS chemicals in most paper-based food packaging, starting Jan. 1, 2023. It also required cookware makers to disclose hazardous chemicals on labels and online, starting in 2024. (*STEP XXII/2*)

■ **Children's products.** In 2021, **California** was the first state to ban intentionally added PFAS in some products for infants and children, such as cribs and playpens, starting July 1, 2023. It also limited unintentional levels. (www.bit.ly/3YS3BSI)

■ **Textiles.** In 2022, **California** banned the sale of textiles with intentionally added PFAS, or above certain levels, starting 2025. Products include clothes, handbags, backpacks, drapes, furniture, bedding, and towels. There are product exceptions. (www.bit.ly/3YSwnmg)

■ **State action.** In 2021, **Maine** passed a law banning nearly all PFAS by 2030. It was the first state, and the world's first government, to enact a broad PFAS prohibition. (*STEP XXI/5*) In 2022, **Washington state** passed a law to tackle PFAS in a broad range of products such as apparel, cosmetics, and firefighter gear — and on the nation's fastest timeline, by 2025. It received broad bipartisan support. (www.bit.ly/3E8sKQV)

■ **EPA action.** In 2021, the **U.S. EPA** announced its "roadmap" to study and regulate PFAS. It plans to set drinking water limits on some PFAS chemicals, require manufacturers to provide detailed reporting, and designate two PFAS as hazardous under the Superfund law.

EPA administrator Michael Regan was the top environmental regulator in North Carolina, and **says he saw "first hand" how "PFAS contamination has been devastating communities for decades."**

Activists are glad the EPA is acting on the PFAS class. Still, they encourage faster timelines and stronger action, for instance to address incineration and industrial discharges. (www.bit.ly/3l5dbe0)

■ **International action.** On Feb. 7, 2023, the **European Chemicals Agency** proposed a phaseout of nearly all PFAS, finishing in the late 2030s. (www.bit.ly/3K8fv6T)

What You Can Do

1) Learn more about PFAS. Follow your interests! Explore the links here. You can read our past articles via our *STEP Index* under **PFAS**. (See box right.) That's where you'll find the *STEP* issues noted above.

2) Write elected officials, media, and manufacturers to support strong and quick PFAS phaseouts.

3) Look for groups taking action you like and support them.

Explore their action pages, get on their action email lists, donate or join, Like their Facebook pages, and more. They're mapping the path, and we empower their work with our numbers.

Here are some options I like.

• **Toxic-Free Future.** Research, advocacy, consumer engagement. www.toxicfreefuture.org/take-action

• **EWG.** Research, advocacy, consumer information. www.ewg.org/areas-focus/toxic-chemicals/pfas-chemicals

• **Earthjustice.** Taking legal action for the earth. www.earthjustice.org/features/breaking-down-toxic-pfas

For more groups and information, see www.pfasactiongroup.com/research-institutes-nonprofits.

SOURCES: www.ecowatch.com/pfas-chemicals-public-health-2648190196.html • www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/climate/biden-pfas-forever-chemicals.html • www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/13/pfas-forever-chemicals-breast-milk-us-study

Weeds Be-Gone!

So how does one use **vinegar for weeds**? Here are a few ways! **1) Pour it directly** onto weeds in driveway cracks. **2) For larger areas**, not near desired plants, **put it in a spray bottle with a little natural liquid soap.** (Note: Skip the commonly-suggested Dawn soaps. Nearly all get low ratings at ewg.org, because of toxics.) **3) Spray stronger vinegar weed products** (20% and 30%, vs. household 5%). Follow label cautions!

Got a pest problem? Or a toxics question?

The STEP Online Index can help! It's easy to look up your topic and find our well-researched, condensed, and useful information — to help you get up-to-speed and into action. It also makes it easy to share this information! Plus you and others can get on our low-volume email list, to hear when new issues are online.

www.healthyworld.org/STEP

ABOUT STEP

The **Next STEP** (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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Printed on recycled paper.