

Frequently Asked Questions – PFOA and PFOS

- 1. What chemicals are included in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Health Advisory?** The specific chemicals the EPA has determined may be harmful are perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS.) These chemicals have been used to make carpets, clothing, fabrics for furniture, and paper packaging for food that is resistant to water, grease or stains. PFOA and PFOS are also used in firefighting chemicals at airfields and in a number of industrial processes.
- 2. What does a “health advisory” mean?** Health advisories provide information on chemicals/substances that may cause human health effects and occur or might occur in drinking water or other substances that are a source of exposure to humans. Health advisories are not enforcement actions or regulations. Health advisories provide technical information to state agencies and other public health officials on health effects, scientific methods, and treatment methods associated with drinking water contamination. Groups affected by the advisories are informed of the information regarding potential health effects and advised on steps they can consider taking if they wish to reduce their risk, for example, considering alternate water supplies if the source of contamination is drinking water. The EPA health advisory for PFOA and PFOS deals with concerns for lifetime exposure to these contaminants rather than limited exposure.
- 3. Who is included in the EPA health advisory?** All individuals who consume the affected water are included in the health advisory. Aside from the general population, pregnant women, breastfeeding infants, and infants fed with formula prepared with the affected water are considered a special group because developing and newborn babies are especially sensitive to the potential impact of the contaminants.
- 4. Are PFOA and PFOS chemicals still made in the United States?** Between 2000 and 2002, PFOS was voluntarily phased out of production in the U.S. by its primary manufacturer. In 2006, eight major companies voluntarily agreed to phase out their global production of PFOA and PFOA-related chemicals, although there are a limited number of ongoing uses.
- 5. Is this a new issue?** No. The EPA, for about sixteen years, has provided information regarding PFOA and PFOS levels in water.
- 6. What is the reason the EPA issued this health advisory? Why is this issue getting so much attention recently?** The EPA issued new guidelines in May 2016, reducing the acceptable levels of PFOA and PFOS in drinking water from 600 parts per trillion to 70 parts per trillion. The cut-off of 70 parts per trillion applies to either PFOA or PFOS or a combined value if both are present. The EPA looked at the latest available research including laboratory studies in rats and mice as well as studies that gathered information from groups of people in certain parts of the country where there are higher levels of PFOA and PFOS and determined that the levels considered to be safe in drinking water needed to be decreased.

7. **What health problems can be caused by PFOA and PFOS?** There are some studies that indicated that exposure to PFOA and PFOS over certain levels may result in developmental effects to fetuses during pregnancy or to breastfed infants (e.g. low birth weight), liver effects, thyroid effects, or cholesterol changes.
8. **Which water system in Alabama is involved in the EPA Health Advisory?** Customers served by West Morgan/East Lawrence Water Authority are currently the only individuals affected by this advisory. The best way to know if your water comes from this system is to check your water bill. Although additional water systems have had test results greater than 70 parts per trillion in the past, these systems are not under the current advisory because of the timing and results of their tests, as well as plans for additional testing in these systems.
9. **Is West Morgan/East Lawrence Water Authority the only water system in the United States with PFOA and PFOS in the water?** No. This is a nationwide issue affecting water systems in several states and information from the EPA is for all water systems with these chemicals in the water above the new cut-off.
10. **Can I eat vegetables from my garden?** Some studies have been done about chemicals being absorbed by plants. The PFOA is a bigger chemical, so less of it can be absorbed. Root vegetables and leafy green vegetables can absorb more chemicals because of the way they grow in the soil and more soil sticks to the plant. Washing these vegetables in bottled water will reduce the small amount of chemicals that could cling to the vegetables. You can also peel the root vegetables.
11. **Can I water my lawn?** Yes. The health advisory does not extend to watering lawns.
12. **Can I take a bath in the water? Can I wash clothes in the water? Can I wash my dishes in the water?** Yes. The health advisory does not extend to bathing, laundry, or washing dishes.
13. **Can my animals drink the water?** No studies have shown that laboratory data from rats and mice can be applied to animals.
14. **What about infants on WIC in the affected areas?** Information regarding the health advisory will be provided and infants on powdered formula will receive ready to feed (pre-mixed) formula if requested by the parent/guardian.

