PFAS FREE DRINKING WATER
A Guide to Talking with Local Officials about PFAS Pollution

What are PFAS?
PFAS (pronounced “PEA-FASS”) are toxic chemicals that have been found in the drinking water of a growing number of Wisconsin communities. They have been used in a wide variety of consumer products, including firefighting foam, nonstick cookware, water-repellant clothing, stain resistant carpets, cleaning products, cosmetics and more.

Are PFAS a threat to human health?
Yes. Even at extremely low levels, exposure to PFAS has been linked to an increased risk of cancer and other serious health problems, such as reproductive and developmental problems, thyroid hormone disruption, high cholesterol, ulcerative colitis, reproductive and developmental problems, negative impacts to the immune system, and more.

Do Wisconsin water utilities test for PFAS?
Despite the serious health risks, many Wisconsin water utilities haven't conducted comprehensive PFAS testing. There are thousands of different chemicals in the PFAS family. Wisconsin has developed drinking water enforcement standards for two of them—PFOS and PFOA. This is a positive development, but it's not enough. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has recommended safety standards for a total of 18 PFAS chemicals. Ask your water utility to test for all 18 of them.

Municipal water utilities have an important role to play in preventing exposure to toxic PFAS chemicals. Because PFAS are odorless and tasteless, testing a water sample is the only way to know if they are present.
YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Public engagement is critical for ensuring that your community’s drinking water is free from toxic PFAS chemicals.

WHAT YOU MIGHT HEAR FROM RELUCTANT PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Some local officials may try to avoid responsibility or offer justifications for inaction. Be prepared to engage with them and to provide accurate and compelling information to help spur them to action.

"The new state standards only require us to test for PFOS and PFOA."
There is nothing that prevents municipalities from voluntarily testing for all 18 PFAS chemicals for which safety standards have been recommended by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. DNR has established a voluntary sampling program, and federal funds are available to help pay for the cost of testing and remediation. Given the known health risks associated with PFAS exposure, local municipalities should begin comprehensive testing immediately to protect their constituents.

"It’ll be too expensive to remediate PFAS contamination if we discover we have a problem."
Under the bipartisan infrastructure bill enacted in November 2021, federal funds will soon be available to help Wisconsin communities with the cost of PFAS remediation. Wisconsin is set to receive approximately $95 million in funding for state revolving fund loan programs. These programs provide grants and below-market-rate loans to fund water infrastructure improvements to protect public health and the environment.

"There’s no point in testing because PFAS are everywhere in the environment."
The widespread nature of PFAS contamination does not mean that water utilities and local officials don’t have a responsibility to take steps to protect their constituents. Scientists tell us that contaminated drinking water is the most common PFAS exposure pathway. Avoiding contaminated water can go a long way toward reducing unnecessary exposure. That’s why it’s so important to know if your water contains elevated levels of PFAS.

"We tested in the past and found no problems."
Between 2013 and 2015, the EPA required some utilities in Wisconsin to test for PFAS under the Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule (UCMR3). This was a step in the right direction, but all water utilities should conduct comprehensive PFAS testing again, regardless of whether they were subject to EPA-mandated testing in the past. Here’s why:

- Utilities required to test under UMCR3 were primarily those serving more than 10,000 people.
- Testing was limited to only six of the thousands of PFAS chemicals that exist.
- Methods for detecting PFAS in water have greatly improved since that time.
"The federal government will require us to test for additional PFAS, but not until 2023."
It's true that starting in 2023, EPA will require water utilities serving more than 10,000 people to test for certain PFAS.* However, those results won't be available for years. It's important to start testing immediately so that if elevated levels of PFAS are discovered, local officials and their constituents have the information they need to take action.

* Water systems serving 10,000 people or fewer will be required to test subject to funding availability and laboratory capacity.

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**The Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule**

The EPA uses the Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule (UCMR) to collect data every five years for contaminants that are suspected to be present in drinking water and do not have health-based standards set under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

**UCMR3**
Ask local officials if your municipality's water was tested under UCMR3. If so, tell them you would like to see the results. You can also search for test results [here](#).

**UCMR5**
Under UCMR 5, water utilities serving more than 10,000 people will be required to test for 29 PFAS in drinking water from January 2023 through December 2025. Smaller water systems will be required to test subject to congressional appropriations funding and laboratory capacity.
Members of your community deserve full transparency about what's in their drinking water. If test results show PFAS levels greater than the EPA's updated health advisory levels, local officials should take immediate steps to inform the public. For PFAS chemicals lacking a federal health advisory level, safety standards recommended by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services serve as a concrete health guideline.

✅ A drinking water advisory should be issued as soon as practicable, but no later than 30 days after the system learns of the exceedance. It should be made available for as long as the exceedance persists.

✅ Public notice should be given in a form and manner that is reasonably calculated to reach all people served by the water utility. The drinking water advisory should be mailed to those who receive a bill. The following steps should be taken to reach people who do not pay water bills, including renters, apartment dwellers, university students, and nursing home patients:

- publish the advisory in a local newspaper
- post in public places served by the water system and on the internet
- provide copies for distribution by customers that provide drinking water to others
- provide copies to engaged community organizations

What type of information should be included in a drinking water advisory?

- all testing results to date and related hazard index calculations
- information on the health risks of PFAS exposure, including risks to children and developing fetuses
- information about how individuals can reduce their exposure
- information about steps the water utility and the municipality are taking to mitigate the health risks of the exceedance
- information about what the water utility and the municipality are doing to correct the problem in the short-term and the long-term

You deserve full transparency about what's in your drinking water. If you have reason to believe local officials are withholding information, you may need to submit a public records request to obtain the information you're asking for. Midwest Environmental Advocates' Open Government Guide can help. Learn more here.
What level of PFAS is considered unsafe?

There is no longer any doubt about the extreme toxicity of PFAS chemicals. In June 2022, the US EPA announced updated health advisory levels for four PFAS compounds. According to the EPA, the safe level for PFOA and PFOS—two of the most widely studied compounds—is near zero. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has recommended safety standards for a total of 18 PFAS compounds.

EPA updated health advisory for PFOA = 0.004 ppt (parts per trillion)
EPA updated health advisory for PFOS = 0.02 ppt

The table and the hazard index found [here](#) provide concrete guidelines to help municipal officials assess the safety of their drinking water.

What should local officials and water utilities do about unsafe levels of PFAS?

- **Issue a drinking water advisory** as soon as practicable, but no later than 30 days after the system learns of the exceedance, and make it available for as long as the exceedance persists.
- **Provide public notice** in a form and manner that is reasonably calculated to reach all people served by the water utility. For people receiving a bill, mail the drinking water advisory. Take the following steps to reach people who do not pay water bills, including renters, apartment dwellers, university students, and nursing home patients:
  - publish the advisory in a local newspaper
  - post in public places served by the water system and on the internet
  - provide copies for distribution by customers that provide drinking water to others
  - provide copies to engaged community organizations
- **Take short-term responsive steps**, such as providing bottled water and in-home filter devices, to mitigate the health risks of the exceedance.
- **Take long-term responsive steps**, such as installing treatment devices at the water system, to reduce or remove PFAS.
- **Give the public ample opportunity to provide feedback** about the public notice and about steps taken by the water utility and local government officials.
Identify the right decision makers.
Start by contacting elected officials in the town, village or city where you live. You may find that elected officials will redirect you to staff at the water utility. This is not uncommon, especially when elected officials feel like they don’t know enough about the issue. Talking with water utility staff can be helpful, but don’t give up on talking with your elected officials. They have the power to order your water utility to test.

Educate, educate, educate!
Provide decision makers with resources to help them better understand the issue.

Don’t be intimidated.
Public officials want to hear from you. They work on many different issues and may not know as much about a specific issue as you do.

Stay on topic.
Your message will be clearer if you avoid political statements and stay focused on the issue at hand.

State your position clearly and concisely.
Make sure decision makers understand what you want them to do.

Be kind and courteous.
Be calm and respectful even if you disagree with someone else’s point of view.

STATE OF WISCONSIN
Wisconsin PFAS Action Plan
WI Department of Natural Resources PFAS Page
WI Department of Health Services PFAS Page

US ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
EPA PFAS Action Plan
EPA - PFAS Page
EPA PFOA & PFOS Health Advisory

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS
#PFASFree Wisconsin
Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger
Midwest Environmental Advocates
S.O.H2O

Midwest Environmental Advocates partnered with other environmental and public health groups to launch #PFASFree Wisconsin in 2021. The goal of the campaign is to raise awareness of the danger that PFAS chemicals pose to public health and to build a broad base of support for testing all public drinking water systems in Wisconsin for the presence of PFAS. Learn more about the campaign at pfasfree.org