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State health department to test residents' blood for chemicals

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After mysterious chemicals were found in their drinking water in 2014, residents of Bucks and Montgomery County towns have wondered how much of the chemicals, called PFAS, had accumulated in their bodies. Now, hundreds will have an answer, after the state received grant money to test their blood this spring.

A grant awarded last week to the Pennsylvania Department of Health will finally answer the question stuck in the minds of many Bucks and Montgomery County residents: Just how bad is it?

Tens of thousands of residents along the counties' shared border found out several years ago that they had been exposed to unregulated PFAS chemicals in their drinking water, potentially going back decades. The chemicals, used in firefighting foams at nearby military bases, could have been in the water as far back as the 1970s, building up in their blood all along until the contamination was discovered in 2014.

To date, only one local resident has publicly released the results of a blood test for the chemicals, which is difficult to orchestrate due to how rare the chemicals are. As part of a 2017 lawsuit, Ivyland resident Dorothy Palmer revealed she had a blood level of 31 parts per billion of one of the chemicals, which is 15 times the national average.

But hundreds more could know their levels soon. Last week, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), a professional organization, awarded a $175,000 grant to the DOH "to support biomonitoring efforts" for the chemicals, according to an announcement on its website. New York state also received $175,000, with funding originating from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Biomonitoring is a term typically used to describe blood testing for PFAS. In an email, PADOH spokesperson Nate Wardle confirmed the funds will be used for testing. However, the tests costs hundreds of dollars per person, and Wardle said only a few hundred residents will be included. That's compared to the more than 70,000 current residents who are believed to have been exposed to high levels of the chemicals in Warminster, Warrington and Horsham, in addition to uncounted numbers of past residents.

"We are hoping to offer biomonitoring to approximately 400 residents," Wardle wrote in an email. "Resident households will be selected based off of (CDC protocols), which involve random sampling based on address."

However, the testing appears to be only a part of a much larger picture. As previously reported, federal lawmakers are working to provide the CDC with $7 million in funding for a large, nationwide study on the health effects of the chemicals through the annual budget process. Wardle described the ASTHO grant as funding a "pilot" program that will help federal agencies "in the design of a larger, national study."

CDC officials have said if the agency received the $7 million, it would complete blood tests at eight or more current and former military installations where the chemicals have been found in drinking water, and that Bucks and Montgomery County communities could be among them. But the CDC says it also is looking into the "best approach" to complete such studies.

Concurrently, ASTHO says the $175,000 in grant money will allow Pennsylvania to "implement and evaluate" a toolkit the CDC has developed to "measure and evaluate community exposures to PFAS in drinking water." In other words, the program paid for by the $175,000 grant could be a bit of fine-tuning ahead of the much larger, nationwide blood sampling program should the CDC receive congressional funding.

“This is huge,” said Hope Grosse, who grew up across the street from the former Naval Air Warfare Center in Warminster and believes contamination from the base sickened her family members.

Grosse has been pushing for blood testing for area residents for years, and said next she’d like to see a health study and follow-through from the government.

“I think it’s a good first step for us,” she said. “We all just have to keep pressing, we just have to keep talking and making noise.”

State Rep. Todd Stephens, R-151, of Horsham, has been a leading advocate for blood testing over the past several years. In an email, Stephens wrote that he hopes the pilot program will lead to a larger analysis.

“It’s been a frustratingly slow process,” Stephens wrote. “But I am nonetheless hopeful we will be selected as a site for the comprehensive blood testing, biomonitoring, and health study I called for years ago and that we deserve.”

Perry Cohn, a retired epidemiologist with the New Jersey Department of Health, added that a pilot a study also could help the CDC determine if states are capable of administering PFAS blood tests.

“It represents a pilot or practice test to assure CDC that the states can do the job,” Cohn said.

For its part, Wardle says the new funding will help PADOH “further the efforts” the agency is already making in the region.

“This will provide the department further opportunities for outreach and education on PFAS with the community, and will allow the commonwealth to continue to take part in the larger, national discussion on this issue,” Wardle wrote.

The PADOH previously has studied the rates of cancers linked to the chemical by some health researchers. Early results were inconclusive but did find some elevated levels. The chemicals have been linked by other studies to health effects including high blood pressure, ulcerative colitis, developmental delays, low birth weight, and testicular and kidney cancer. The PADOH is currently conducting a more in-depth study.

According to ASTHO, Pennsylvania and New York are due to present the results of their projects this June; Wardle confirmed the state must have the study completed and ready for presentation by June 1. Details of when, where and how the blood testing will occur are not yet available.

Staff writer Jenny Wagner contributed to this report.