

National Health Advisory

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To:	General Practices, Pharmacists, and Primary Health Organisations in the greater Wellington and Wairarapa regions
From:	Dr Jill McKenzie, Medical Officer of Health
Date:	8 December 2017
Title:	National Health Advisory: Investigation into potentially contaminated water

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Investigation into potentially contaminated water

ADVISORY SUMMARY:

An all of Government working group is responding to PFAS (specifically PFOS and PFOA) found in groundwater at the NZ Defence Force Ohakea and Woodbourne bases. Affected people have been informed this morning (via a letter-box drop) and a statement will be released to the local media. This email includes questions and answers on possible health queries, and general FAQs. People may call Healthline for more information if they are concerned about their health.

Background: Emerging organic contaminants are a class of contaminants which are becoming apparent in the environment and raising concerns about their potential effect on the environment and human health. One class of emerging contaminant are Poly- and Per-Fluoro-Alkyl Substances (PFAS). The focus of concern are two compounds in this class, Perfluorooctane sulphonic acid (PFOS), and Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), historically used in the manufacture of firefighting foams. These foams were used widely internationally from the 1970s as they were very effective in suppressing liquid fuel fires.

Defence Forces worldwide, including Australia, have found PFOS and PFOA contamination in soils and groundwater associated with firefighting foam practice areas. This triggered NZ Defence Force to look at their own sites. Water supply testing at Waiouru, Linton, Ohakea, Woodbourne and Burnham confirmed water supplies are safe to drink. Other defence sites are on reticulated council supply. However, contamination of groundwater was found at the Ohakea and Woodbourne Air Force bases and further testing is needed to determine the extent of that contamination and whether neighbouring household water supplies are affected.

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He ture no nga korero katoa kei roto o tenei karere, no reira, kia tupato. Mehemea kaore matau kua e mau. Me whakamohiotia atu ki to Tari, me te mea nana I tonu mai. E Tika Hoki.

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Contact with affected people: Landowners and residents will receive advice through a letter drop and a follow up visit. Alternative drinking-water supplies will be offered to residents until the results of the water testing is known. Landowners and/or residents whose water is being investigated may seek support and networks such as an 0800 number, web material and local health services will be available.

Health risk assessment: PFAS compounds are persistent in the environment and are available to humans and animals through consumption of food or water rather than from skin or other contact. The reason for concern is the potential for long term exposure to be harmful to human health, due to the ability of these compounds to be stored in the body. There is currently no consistent evidence that non occupational exposure to PFOS and PFOA causes adverse human health effects but as this is an emerging contaminant, the evidence around the health risks is still unclear. The Ministry of Health advises that there are no acute human health risks.

A 2013 report commissioned by the Ministry of Health found that the concentrations of PFOA in adult serum in New Zealand are generally similar to, or lower than, those in the USA, Canada, Germany, and Australia, while the concentrations of PFOS concentrations are considerably lower than those in USA, Canada, Germany, and Australia.

There is currently no New Zealand guideline for PFAS in drinking water. The Ministry of Health has reviewed the guideline levels adopted overseas including in Australia and the United States, and recommends adopting interim guidance levels for use in New Zealand that are the same as the values being proposed in Australia. These levels are 0.07 µg/L for PFOS and 0.56 µg/L for PFOA.

FURTHER ATTACHMENTS

Two further documents are additional to this advisory and available for reading on our website at www.rph.org.nz/publichealthalerts

1. [Health FAQs](#)
2. [PFAS Key Messages](#)