

What are Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs)?



PCBs are a group of human-made chemicals. PCBs were widely used in building materials and electrical products in the past. Caulk, paint, glues, plastics, fluorescent lighting ballasts, transformers and capacitors are examples of products that may contain PCBs.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned manufacturing and certain uses of PCBs in 1978. Buildings constructed or renovated between 1950 and 1978 may have building materials and electrical products that contain PCBs.

How do people come in contact with PCBs?

PCBs continue to be widespread in our soil, air, water and food because of past use and disposal. PCBs break down very slowly and can remain in the environment for a long time. Most people have low levels of PCBs in their bodies because of the widespread presence of PCBs in the environment. In general, however, PCB levels in people have been going down since they were banned.

Food – including meat, dairy products and fish (especially fish caught in polluted waters) – is the main source of exposure to PCBs for most people.

In recent years, PCBs have been found in some older buildings, including schools in New York City, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Lighting ballasts in older fluorescent lighting fixtures and caulk are the main sources of PCBs in school buildings.

Old lighting ballasts may contain PCB oil and, as the ballasts age, the PCB oil can leak onto nearby surfaces or produce vapors in the air.

Caulk is a flexible material used to seal gaps to make windows, masonry and joints in buildings and other structures watertight or airtight. PCBs were used as a component of caulk until 1978. As caulk containing PCBs deteriorates, PCBs may be released in the dust or air.

People inside school buildings may be exposed to PCBs by:

- Breathing in dust or vapors that contain PCBs
- Getting dust containing PCBs on their hands and then swallowing it while eating or drinking
- Skin contact with materials that contain PCBs

What are possible health effects from coming in contact with PCBs?

The potential for health effects from PCBs, as with other chemicals, depends on how much, how often, and how long someone is exposed.

PCBs have been shown to have effects on the immune, reproductive, nervous and endocrine (hormone) systems in animal studies. PCBs have also been shown to cause cancer in animals. Studies in humans show that humans could also have these health effects.



Questions?

For more information about PCBs and health effects, contact the Vermont Department of Health at 802-863-7598.