

Toxic Wrappers: The Unappetizing Truth About Fast Food Packaging



SILENT SPRING INSTITUTE
Researching the Environment and Women's Health

What are highly fluorinated chemicals?

Highly fluorinated chemicals, also known as PFASs or PFCs, are water-, heat-, and oil-resistant chemicals found in a wide range of consumer products such as stain-resistant carpets and upholstery, waterproof apparel, floor waxes, nonstick cookware, greaseproof food packaging, and even dental floss. People can be exposed to these chemicals from direct contact with products, or through the air they breathe and the food they eat. There have also been instances nationwide of drinking water supplies becoming contaminated with PFASs from industrial sources and fire training facilities.

What are the health risks?

Some PFASs have been linked with cancer, thyroid disease, immune suppression, low birth weight, decreased fertility, and many other health effects. PFASs are ubiquitous in our environment and in wildlife because they are used so widely and are extremely resistant to degradation. More than 98 percent of Americans have PFASs in their blood and some of these chemicals can remain in the body for years.

What did our study find?

- We tested more than 400 samples of food packaging from 27 leading fast food chains collected from five regions in the United States.
- We found that almost half of paper wrappers (e.g., burger wrappers and pastry bags) and 20 percent of paperboard samples (e.g., boxes for fries and pizza) contained fluorine—a marker of PFASs.
- Some of the samples contained a type of PFAS called PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid, also known as C8)—a long-chain PFAS that several U.S. manufacturers voluntarily agreed to stop using in food packaging back in 2011 due to health hazards.
- Previous studies have shown that PFASs in food packaging can leach into food, raising concerns about potential health effects.
- Although U.S. manufacturers have agreed to phase out long-chain PFASs in consumer products, other countries still produce them, and many companies have been replacing them with shorter-chain PFASs that have not been adequately tested for safety.



How can I reduce my exposure?

- Eat more fresh foods and avoid take-out food items that come in greaseproof packaging.
- Ask fast food restaurants to use packaging free of fluorinated chemicals.
- Encourage state and federal agencies to restrict the use of all fluorinated chemicals in consumer products.
- Use Silent Spring Institute's Detox Me app (www.silentspring.org/detoxme). This free smartphone app walks you through simple, research-based tips on how to reduce your exposure to potentially harmful chemicals, including fluorinated chemicals, where you live and work.

Reference:

Schaidt LA, Balan SA, Blum A, Andrews DQ, Strynar MJ, Dickinson ME, Lunderberg DM, Lang JR, Peaslee GF. 2017. Fluorinated Compounds in U.S. Fast Food Packaging. *Environmental Science & Technology Letters*. <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/acs.estlett.6b00435>

