COMMUNITY HEALTH

NEWSLETTER

FALL EDITION

BARNSTABLE COUNTY

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

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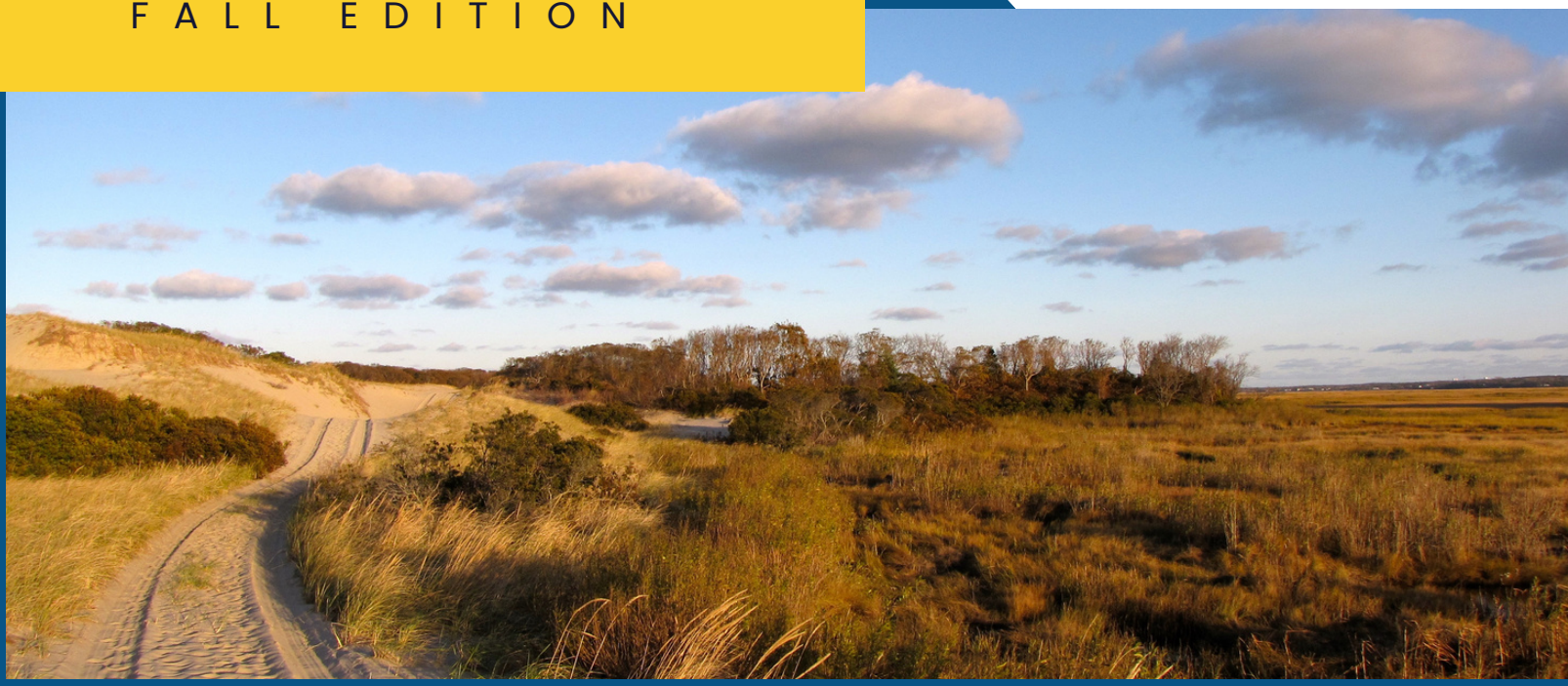

Welcome to the fall edition of the Barnstable County Community Health Newsletter!

In this edition, we discuss important public health issues impacting Cape Codders as we head into the winter months such as mental health, social isolation, emergency preparedness, water quality, and more.

We'd also like to extend a warm welcome to our new Public Health Nurse, Wendy Judd. Wendy received her BSN degree from Southern Connecticut State University and has been in clinical practice as a registered nurse on Cape Cod for over three decades. She has a passion for promoting wellness and education, and is looking forward to working closely with the 15 towns of Barnstable County to address current and future health needs of the community.

Our Public Health Nursing Division continues to encourage everyone ages 6 months + to get their annual flu vaccine and be up to date on their COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters. Respiratory viruses (flu, COVID-19 variants, and RSV) are proving to be severe and prolific this 2022/2023 season, resulting in an uptick in hospitalizations nation-wide. Vaccinations, in addition to good hand washing practices, social distancing measures, and staying home while sick are the best ways to prevent spreading harmful germs.

To arrest the triple threat that RSV, COVID-19 and flu pose to our community, the Public Health Nursing Division will be holding a combined COVID-19 and flu vaccine clinic in the Harborview Conference Room located at the Barnstable County Complex in Barnstable Village from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM on on Wednesday, December 14th. The Pfizer Bivalent COVID-19 vaccine will be offered, along with a limited supply of flu vaccine. Registration is required (click the link below).

COVID-19 Flu/COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic
Wednesday, December 14, 2022
9:00 AM to 12:00 PM

Harborview Conference Room
3195 Main Sreet, Barnstable Village

Register Today!

Finally, in addition to vaccination, home testing is one of the best tools we have to stop the spread of COVID-19 during the holidays. Stock up on COVID-19 home tests and use them before family gatherings, ESPECIALLY if you're not feeling well or think you could have been exposed to someone who is sick. Click the link for information regarding FREE COVID-19 home tests.

Home Testing Resources

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ADDRESSING THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Public Health Nursing Staff

While the initial lockdowns that defined the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 may be fading in the rear view of memory, the lasting impacts of social isolation remain with us. Feeling connected can be challenging in the winter months on Cape Cod. Understanding the impacts of social isolation on health provides insight into a range of potential solutions from public health, local government, and community organizations.

What exactly is social isolation and how does it relate to loneliness?

A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) points out that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are socially isolated. Older adults are at increased risk because they are more likely to face factors such as living alone, the loss of family or friends, chronic illness, and hearing loss.(1)

Social isolation is associated with an increased risk for all possible causes of death, as well as accelerated aging, dementia, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, and weakened immunity. Loneliness contributes to depression, anxiety, suicide risk and poorer outcomes in congestive heart failure patients.(2) Older adults, immigrants, minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations are the most vulnerable.

How can we address loneliness and social isolation from a public health perspective at both the individual and community levels?

The first step is identifying at risk populations in our towns. Year-round residents of the Cape have expressed their feelings of isolation and emotional loneliness, especially during the colder months. This was enumerated in an Outer Cape public health needs assessment conducted in the Spring of 2022. When asked what the greatest effect from COVID-19 was out of five choices, 55% of the residents chose increased social isolation/emotional loneliness as first. This answer was the second choice for 22% of residents. Additionally, 20% stated that they currently had a mental health diagnosis.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

(Continued)

Once a need is identified, public health looks to meet that need through multiple levels of outreach and engagement. Collaborating with town health departments and community organizations provides opportunities for diverse program interventions, as there is not a one size fits all solution to social isolation. While there are multiple resources available, informing residents how to access them, or that they even exist, is paramount to connecting people with available supports.

Tips for Combating Social Isolation

Reach Out and Connect

This can be by phone, on the computer or in person. Having regular interactions with others can make a dramatic difference in your mood, motivation, and health.

Get Active

We know how important physical activity is for our health, but it can be hard to stay motivated. Having a partner or regularly scheduled group activity improves accountability and consistency.

Wellness Checks

Consider signing up for a check in call. Councils on Aging, Good Samaritans, and many local police departments have wellness check programs where you receive a regularly scheduled phone call to see how you are doing. This is especially beneficial if you live alone.

Volunteer

The benefits of helping others include “an improved ability to manage stress and stave off disease as well as reduced rates of depression and an increased sense of life satisfaction”. (3)

Talk to Your Doctor

Tell your doctor how you are feeling, especially if you are depressed, anxious or hopeless. Your mental and emotional status is a part of your overall health, and therefore important to share with your healthcare provider.

Join a Club

Whether it be bowling, Mah Jong or water aerobics, there are a multitude of group activities that bring people together through shared recreation. Besides developing comradery, many of these activities stimulate the mind and deter cognitive decline.

Social Isolation Resources on Cape Cod

Barnstable County Human Services Network

Cape & Islands for Good (United Way)

Elder Services of Cape Cod

Good Samaritans

Hyannis Youth and Community Center

Outer Cape Winter

Upper Cape Community Resources

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1. https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html
2. ifm.org: Importance of Social Support and Relationships
3. https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/71964/7-scientific-benefits-helping-others

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988: THE NEW SUICIDE & CRISIS HOTLINE

By Theresa Covell, Assistant Public Health Nurse

*"Who is 988 for? 988 is for **ANYONE** in emotional distress or suicidal crisis. It is for an individual who is worried about a loved one and not sure how to support that person or where to get them help"*

Remember these three numbers: 9-8-8. Encourage your family members and friends to remember them too. This new three-digit dialing code for call or text, active across the United States as of July 2022, routes callers to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which has been in operation since 2005. It's now called the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The previous Lifeline phone number—800-273-8255—is still active and will remain available to people in emotional distress or suicidal crisis, but simply dialing 9-8-8 connects callers to the same trained counselors who will listen, understand, provide support, and connect them to resources if necessary.

While calling a crisis line can be intimidating to some, counselors who answer incoming 988 calls work hard to make the experience as easy and as comfortable as possible. Numerous studies have shown that callers feel less suicidal, depressed, and overwhelmed after speaking with a crisis counselor.

On Cape Cod, all calls to 988 are routed to the Samaritans: a local, non-profit, non-secular group that is part of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Network. The group was founded in 1977 and its mission is to combat suicide by fostering caring, connection, resilience, and public understanding.

All calls to 988 are confidential. However, when necessary (and as a last resort), a counselor may initiate an active rescue on the caller's behalf. This intervention only occurs when the counselor feels a caller may inflict life-threatening injury to themselves or others.

--The previous Lifeline phone number, (800) 273-8255 will remain active.

988: THE NEW SUICIDE AND CRISIS HOTLINE

(Continued)

988 is a number to call or text when:

- You or a loved one are in suicidal or substance abuse crisis.
- You are overwhelmed, sad, lonely, angry, confused, or in need of a "safe space" to talk when it seems like there's nowhere to turn. You do not need to be suicidal to use 988.
- You've stopped doing things you usually love; you're tearful, not eating or sleeping properly, drifting from people close to you, taking alcohol or drugs to cope or self-harming.
- You are worried about a loved one or friend and are not sure how to support them.

- All callers can access crisis counselors through 9-8-8 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Interpreter services are available through 9-8-8.
- Those who are deaf or hard of hearing may use the online chat function at Lifeline Chat and Text : **Lifeline (988lifeline.org)**.
- Teletypewriter (TTY) users may use their preferred relay service or dial 711 followed by 988.

988: THE NEW SUICIDE AND CRISIS HOTLINE

(Continued)

What about 911?

Enhanced collaboration between 911 and 988 provides more options for people in crisis. Mobile crisis teams staffed by behavioral health specialists may be dispatched to aid individuals in mental health, substance use or suicidal crisis. These teams can de-escalate crisis situations and connect a person to crisis stabilization programs or other services. They collaborate closely with law enforcement in high-risk situations. If a suicide attempt will occur shortly or is already in progress, 911 will be dispatched.

Get involved here on Cape Cod!

The Samaritans offer several services and programs including the opportunity to train to become a crisis line volunteer or paid employee. Email **info@capesamaritans.org** for more information.

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HOARDING OR CLUTTER? UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

Lynn Mulkeen, Senior Environmental Specialist

Do you have concerns that a loved one is struggling with “too much stuff”? Are you worried that they may have crossed over from sentimental attachments or acquiring collectibles into hoarding behavior? Hoarding Disorder is a recognized psychological disorder and a painful challenge for everyone involved. Side-effects of Hoarding Disorder can range from feelings of shame and the breakdown of relationships, to health and safety concerns and loss of housing. Then again, not every pile of clutter is hoarding. Recognizing some signs can help you keep your loved ones safe.

HOARDING OR CLUTTER?

(Continued)

Is it Hoarding?

It is important to keep in mind that your expectations and ideas of acceptable living spaces may not be the same as someone else's. Removing your personal judgment of the living space is important to making a productive assessment of the situation. Consider the following:

Grounds for Concern	Unlikely to be Hoarding
An individual is unable to perform activities of daily living and self-care (bathing, preparing food, caring for pets, sleeping in bed) due to accumulation of items.	The individual is able to perform activities of daily living despite some cluttered areas.
An individual feels anxiety when confronted with the idea of discarding items or acquiring open space and are comforted by their possessions regardless of the monetary or sentimental value!	The individual is able to part with items without inducing anxious feelings.
An individual continues to acquire items (stores, online, swap shops, yard sales, etc.)	The individual is not actively acquiring new items; the items in question may have come through other avenues (inheritance, for example) or be situational (a craft project has been left out on a table).
An individual is unable to navigate living spaces safely or egresses are blocked due to the volume of items.	The individual's use of living spaces and/or access to entrances and exits is not hindered by the accumulation of items.

HOARDING OR CLUTTER?

(Continued)

Hoarding behaviors are often the result of previous trauma or are triggered by a traumatic event. No matter what the cause, kindness, compassion, patience, and empathy are essential to helping someone who is struggling with hoarding. Recognizing that there is so much more to hoarding disorder than the "stuff" in front of you, there are some basic "Dos and Don'ts" when approaching and helping your loved one:

DO...

- ...always remember hoarding is a mental health challenge, not a character flaw.
- ...make a plan: goal setting keeps everyone on the same page and eliminates surprises.
- ...initially focus on safety and the organization of items. Prioritize walkways, egress, fire danger, necessary daily activities, etc. Discussions about discarding items can come later.
- ...be encouraging and recognize positive change! Rewarding progress with non-acquiring behaviors such as a coffee date or walk can be helpful.
- ...recognize your own strengths: Maybe you are not the right person to help with the actual sorting of items, but you can be helpful in other ways (goal setting, emotional support, participating in recreational non-acquiring activities).
- ...keep your expectations reasonable and remember that how you live in your own space is not necessarily how your loved one has to live in theirs. Safety is the ultimate goal.
- ...practice self-care and take time away when you need it.
- ...show them love, empathy and respect and expect it in return.

HOARDING OR CLUTTER?

(Continued)

DON'T...

- ...expect a quick fix: re-learning habits takes time and parting with items is difficult. Patience is key.
- ...use judgmental language or non-verbal cues: respect your loved one and their things- with your actions and facial expressions in addition to your words.
- ...touch or remove items without permission. Trust and respect are important; the individual must make their own decisions about items and where they go. Important! “clean-outs” (when a space is nearly completely cleared of items) are extremely counterproductive to a successful resolution of a hoarding situation. Not only does it cause extreme anxiety, but in nearly 100% of cases, hoarding behaviors escalate.
- ...expect anything in return for your support and assistance.

When approaching a loved one for whom you are concerned, begin with these questions: Are they safe? Are they healthy? Keeping this in mind as you move through the process will help you stay focused on the long-term goals and the well-being of everyone involved.

Resources

Digging out: Helping Your Loved One Manage Clitter, Hoarding, and Compulsive Acquiring, by M. Tompkins and T. Hartl (Available in Bookstores)

Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding (Treatments That Work), by D. Tolin and R. O. Frost (Available in Bookstores)

CapeCod.Gov: Hoarding Task Force

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ARE YOU READY FOR AN EMERGENCY?

By Chip Reilly, Emergency Planning Specialist

What is emergency preparedness?

Emergency Preparedness refers to the steps you can take to make sure you are safe: before, during, or after an emergency or natural disaster.

In emergency preparedness, there are three core concepts or steps:

- **Build a Kit**
- **Make a Plan**
- **Be Informed**

You or the person you care for can be prepared for emergency situations by creating a plan, reviewing, or practicing it regularly, and keeping an emergency supply kit. None of these steps should be alarming; in fact, most people will have the things they need for an emergency kit already in their home. The idea is to group some items together so that you know where they are if needed.

Disasters happen unexpectedly. Emergency situations may force you to evacuate your neighborhood or confine you to your home. A major disaster could leave you without food, water, or shelter. You may be without basic services such as gas, electricity, or telephone for an unknown period.

Although our Cape towns are preparing diligently to aid residents when emergencies strike, large disasters may completely overwhelm our first responders (fire, police, and medical personnel, in addition to in-home support service workers) with multiple public safety needs. First responders will need to focus first on the hardest hit areas and help the most severely endangered people and heaviest impacted areas.

By preparing and planning ahead of time, you can be ready to take care of yourself and/or your loved ones during a disaster. Your safety during an emergency depends on the tools and plans you have in place to make it on your own, at least for a short period of time, no matter where you are when disaster strikes.

Preparing Emergency Supply Kits

Be prepared to use what you have on hand for at least three to seven days. Consider having more than one emergency kit: a kit for home, your vehicle, workplace, and your child's school. Your kit for home should contain everything you need to shelter in place. The other kits for outside of the home should be a smaller transportable versions of your home kit that are easier to use during travel.

Ready.gov: Build a Kit

ARE YOU READY FOR AN EMERGENCY?

(Continued)

Ready.gov, linked above, has a wealth of information about how to build a basic disaster supply kit. Most of the items are likely to be found in your home. Of particular importance are prescription medications. About half of all Americans take a prescription medicine every day. An emergency can make it difficult to refill a prescription or to find an open pharmacy. It is therefore essential to organize and protect any prescriptions, over-the-counter drugs, and vitamins to be fully prepared for an emergency.

Make a Family Disaster Plan for Emergencies

Your family disaster plan should include the following:

Have an Escape Route

Think about and know the various emergency exits and alternate escape routes at the places you frequent in case a disaster such as a fire or earthquake strikes: your home, place of business, place of worship, and your children's school. Talk to your employer and your children's school about emergency plans. Find out how they will communicate with families during an emergency. Talk to your neighbors about how you can work together. Make special arrangements for children or people with disabilities to safely be able to reach the ground level if they have to be evacuated from a second story.

Identify meeting places outside of your home and your neighborhood. Create a plan to get away if you must leave your neighborhood: Plan how you will assemble your family and where you will go if you must evacuate your home.

Make a Family Communications Plan

If your family is not together when a disaster strikes, you should know how to contact each other and where to meet safely if the situation allows.

Create a plan where everyone knows how to contact each other through phoning or emailing the same family member or relative in the event of an emergency. Having an out-of-town person for all family members to contact in case local phone lines are not operational, is a safe strategy. Make sure all family members have the emergency family contact numbers, a working cell phone, and email addresses.

ARE YOU READY FOR AN EMERGENCY?

(Continued)

Be Informed

Receiving advance warnings for severe weather, timely emergency alerts, and information during a disaster is critical to staying safe during an emergency. Every family should have multiple methods for receiving emergency alerts, including at least one with an audible alert to wake you in the middle of the night.

Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs) are short emergency messages from authorized federal, state, local, tribal and territorial public alerting authorities that can be broadcast from cell towers to any WEA-enabled mobile device in a locally targeted area. WEAs can be sent by state and local public safety officials, the National Weather Service, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the President of the United States.

To learn more about emergency alerts and how to enable them on your smart phone, visit:

Wireless Emergency Alerts

Plan for People with Disabilities and Other Special Needs

Those with disabilities or other special needs often have unique needs that require more detailed planning. In the event of a disaster consider the following when preparing for an emergency:

- Plan for a power outage.
- Know how to work backup power sources.
- Consider a medical alert system that will allow you to call for help if you are immobilized in an emergency.
- If you use an electric wheelchair have a manual one as a backup.
- Teach those who need to assist you in an emergency how to operate necessary equipment.
- Arrange for more than one person to check on you in an emergency.
- Have a cell phone and keep it charged. Keep the numbers you may need to call in an emergency with you.
- If you are vision impaired, deaf, or hard of hearing, plan for someone to convey essential information to you if you are unable to use the TV or radio.
- Keep shut off switch for oxygen equipment near your bed or chair should you need to get to it quickly.
- Make sure your emergency kit is kept current.
- Take your medications with you if you leave your home.

Additional Emergency Preparedness Resources

Eversource: Notice to Customers with Life Support Equipment

Eversource maintains a list of customers who depend on life-support equipment – such as a ventilator or dialysis machinery – so you can be notified before planned power outages or when there is a potential for outages from severe weather. When the power does go out, they will also reach out and provide information about helpful services. For more information, visit the link above or call: (800) 592-2000.

Mass.gov: Stay Aware. Be Prepared.

Mass.gov: Customize an Emergency Preparedness Plan for Individuals Who Need Extra Help

Ready.gov: Winter Weather Preparedness

Ready.gov: Make a Plan Form

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PFAS ON CAPE COD: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Department Staff Contributor

Lately there's been a lot of buzz about a very long difficult to pronounce compound that leaves some of us scratching our heads. What is it, how do we say it, and why do we care? Try your hand at saying it out loud: Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl. That's PER-and-PAUL-ee-floor-oh-AL-kill. Not bad, right? You could also just say PFAS, but if you master the long version, you'll impress everyone at the holiday get-to-gether.

The Backstory

PFAS (plural because there are some 4,000+ variations) are often referred to as "forever chemicals". They were created in the mid-20th century and became a staple in our global manufacturing processes. From a science perspective, they're nothing short of extraordinary. In addition to repelling oil and water, they are resistant to friction, heat, and degradation by other chemicals or bacteria. These properties make them virtually indestructible under natural conditions. They last, quite literally, forever. You can find them in everyday items like cleaning supplies, rain jackets, non-stick cookware, personal care products (shampoo, dental floss, nail polish, eye makeup), fire-fighting agents, and stain resistant coatings for carpets, upholstery, and other fabrics.

Like many iconic forms of human innovation, PFAS have a dark side that wasn't well understood until the 1990s…a good 40 years after the start of their global and pervasive use. It turns out the very qualities that make PFAS useful are also the qualities that make them hard to address, from an environmental and public health standpoint. Once they find their way into the air, soil, groundwater, and surface water, they remain indefinitely.

PFAS on Cape Cod

The fact that Cape Cod is essentially a pile of sand left behind by the glaciers 6,000 years ago makes it particularly sensitive to PFAS contamination. Sand, it turns out, is great at draining rainwater, stormwater, and wastewater from the surface and delivering it to the groundwater and aquifer below (aquifer is a just a fancy word referring to the space underground where water collects). We then tap into the aquifer with wells and public water systems for bathing, drinking, cooking, etc. While sand does have some nifty filtration capabilities for relatively large contaminants such as bacteria, it's a poor filter for other things, including PFAS.

On Cape Cod PFAS contamination comes from multiple sources: fire training areas (PFAS make excellent additives to fire extinguishing foams, which can be used quite effectively to fight fuel fires), airports, military bases, landfills, municipal wastewater biosolids, and private septic systems. Because of its unique geology and sandy soils, Cape Cod is an excellent place for nationally renowned organizations to study how PFAS and other contaminants move through the environment and enter the food web and drinking water.

PFAS ON CAPE COD

(Continued)

Have you heard of STEEP? It stands for Sources, Transport, Exposure & Effects of PFAS. It's an important research project led by the University of Rhode Island in collaboration with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Silent Spring Institute. The goal? To help inform the development of standardized testing methodologies and benchmark's for PFAS, determine PFAS levels in private wells, and better understand how PFAS impact human health through long-term health studies. Cape Cod is an important hub for STEEP's research.

Health Impacts and Health Studies

Currently, we know very little about how PFAS affect our bodies and the environment. It is believed that PFAS can cause damage to the liver and immune system in humans and animals. Other impacts may be increased cholesterol levels, decreases in infant birth weights, decreased vaccine response in children, increased risk of high blood pressure or pre-eclampsia in pregnant woman, and increased risk of kidney or testicular cancer.

Studies, like STEEP's work described above, are underway to enhance the science community's understanding of PFAS contamination, and prompt funding for PFAS phase-out, remediation, and monitoring nationwide and globally. Public awareness and engagement are essential to the success of these efforts. As Cape Codders, we have a unique opportunity to be on the front lines of cutting-edge research to minimize the public health and environmental impacts of these detrimental chemicals.

Routine Testing for PFAS

Laboratory testing for PFAS contamination is one challenge that must be addressed nationwide. Laboratory analysis of PFAS in water (drinking water, wastewater, and surface water) is expensive and complex. So even if we know what the health impacts are, we still need accessible, standardized methods of testing to be able to effectively monitor contamination levels.

Barnstable County Water Quality Lab has been closely tracking recently approved sampling and analysis methodologies, as well as the establishment of maximum contaminant levels for PFAS in Massachusetts. County funds have been set aside to purchase state-of-the-art equipment to assess contamination from six PFAS compounds that were recently regulated by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. Through these efforts, the Laboratory will eventually be ready to support an accessible, affordable monitoring effort on Cape Cod.

What You Can Do Right Now

While the health impacts of PFAS are not fully understood, scientists have determined that the risk is well worth the investment in research,

PFAS ON CAPE COD

(Continued)

monitoring, remediation, and educating the public to limit PFAS exposure. So get involved, be informed, and engage in this important conversation! The STEEP website and others have excellent resources that describe what PFAS are, how they impact our health and the environment, and what actions you can take to reduce your exposure. Learn how PFAS compounds are being phased out but are still prevalent in the global environment. You can even access the results to the current PFAS studies that have taken place right here on Cape Cod.

Additional Resources

From STEEP:

PFAS Exposure, Health Risks, Progress, and Actions

Research Studies in Environmental Fate & Transport, Childhood Risk, Metabolic Effects, and Detection Tools

From the Massachusetts Department of Public Health:

Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in Drinking Water - FAQs

From the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR):

Health Effects of PFAS

National Health Studies

PFAS FAQs

From the US Environmental Protection Agency:

Research on PFAS Page

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WHERE TO FIND US

COMMUNITY HEALTH

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

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We want to hear from you!

Click the button below to answer a few questions to help us better understand what our readers would like to see in future editions. We value your input!

Send us your feedback!