

Public Health Assessment Overview

A public health assessment is an approach used by health assessors to evaluate exposures and potential health effects for communities who may be being exposed to hazardous substances.

What is a public health assessment?

The purpose of a public health assessment is to find out if people are being exposed to hazardous substances in their community and, if so, whether that exposure is harmful and should be stopped or reduced.

Who performs a public health assessment?

Public health assessments are performed by health assessors. These are professionals who work at public health agencies, usually at the state or federal level, with knowledge of toxicology, geology, public health practice, and more.

During the public health assessment process, public health assessors will work with the communities and many other experts and agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), emergency management agencies, state agencies, and local health departments to help determine if hazards exist.

In Ohio, public health assessments are performed by the [ODH Health Assessment Section](#).

For more information, visit www.odh.gov/has.

In Ohio, public health assessments are performed by the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) Health Assessment Section. The ODH Health Assessment Section is a partner of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a federal public health agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through the [ATSDR Program to Promote Local Efforts to Reduce Environmental Exposures](#) (APPLETREE). More information about the APPLETREE program is available at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/states.

Why might a public health assessment be performed?

A public health assessment may begin when a contaminated site is listed on the U.S. EPA's National Priorities List (NPL). ATSDR is required by law to conduct a public health assessment at all sites proposed for or listed on the NPL. It may also begin at the request of a community, or at the request of one government agency to another.

Each site is different, and there are many different reasons a site might need a public health assessment.

What are the main steps of a public health assessment?

The two main parts of a public health assessment are the exposure evaluation and the health effects evaluation. The **exposure evaluation** involves studying environmental sampling data and, if hazardous substances are identified, understanding how people might come into contact with them in air, water, soil, or food in their community. The **health effects evaluation** involves reviewing the exposure evaluation data and understanding which parts of the community are at risk of health impacts from being exposed.

From those evaluations, conclusions are made about the level of health impacts, if any, posed by a site. If health impacts are possible or identified, recommendations are made to stop or reduce exposures in a public health action plan.

What is the community's role during the public health assessment process?

Communities play an important role during the public health assessment process. Throughout the evaluation process, ODH actively gathers concerns, information, and comments from the people who live or work near a site. This includes residents of the area, civic leaders, health professionals, and community groups.

What are the products of a completed public health assessment?

At the end of a public health assessment, the health assessors will publish a public health assessment report or a public health consultation report. These reports will be shared with other agencies who may help with cleaning up the contamination or reducing exposures to discharged chemicals. The reports are publicly available.

A **public health assessment** report includes information on the site's history and background, a description of any contamination or hazardous substances present at the site, and how communities may be or are being exposed to the contamination. A public health assessment also includes a public health action plan which are recommendations to reduce or remove exposures.

A list of Ohio's reports can be found at [ATSDR's Ohio Public Health Assessments & Consultations page](https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/PHAListing.aspx?StateIndicator=OH) at <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/PHAListing.aspx?StateIndicator=OH>.

A **public health consultation** report is similar to a public health assessment report, but it usually only focuses on one part of the assessment process, like a single chemical or a single part of the community. A public health consultation may also be in the form of a letter known as a letter health consultation.

What isn't included in a public health assessment?

A public health assessment does not include medical exams. Health assessors will not sample your blood or body for chemicals. If you have medical concerns, talk with your doctor about testing and treatment for specific contaminants or hazardous substances.

For More Information

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