

In a First, California Moves to Protect People from Toxic PFAS Chemicals in Carpets

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In a groundbreaking move, California has proposed that carpets and rugs containing the stain-resistant fluorinated chemicals known as PFAS^[1] should be considered a priority product under the state's Safer Consumer Products program. This could lead to the development of safer alternatives to the use of these potentially harmful chemicals in carpets and rugs.



Carpets and rugs cover nearly half of all U.S. homes and workplaces. The California Department of Toxic Substances Control has identified carpets and rugs as the largest potential sources of significant and widespread PFAS exposures, especially for children.

The proposed priority listing is an essential stage in the state's program to assess toxic chemicals in consumer products and find alternatives. If the listing is made final, it would prompt carpet manufacturers to look for safer alternatives and help shoppers find healthier floor treatment choices for their homes. The public can submit comments supporting the listing through April 16.

The first stain-resistant carpet was introduced in 1986 with the Stainmaster label. Other manufacturers followed with "Wear-Dated" and "Worry Free" treatments. But these treatments are far from worry free.

To repel stains, the carpet industry used the same kind of chemicals in DuPont's Teflon cookware – poly- and perfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS chemicals. The Scotchgard chemical, called PFOS, and its close chemical cousin PFOA, were phased out under pressure from the Environmental Protection Agency after the revelation of secret studies by their manufacturers that found they caused cancer and birth defects in lab animals, built up in people's bodies and did not break down in the environment. In studies of tens of thousands of people exposed to PFOS and PFOA, very small doses of the chemicals have been linked to cancer, hormone disruption, immune system harm, reproductive harm and liver damage.

The U.S. carpet industry transitioned away from its use of PFOS, PFOA and other so-called long-chain PFAS chemicals in 2008. But they've been replaced by a new generation of "short-chain" chemicals in this class that have many of the same potential health concerns.

California regulators lists all PFAS chemicals as having the potential for bioaccumulation; cancer; developmental, endocrine and liver toxicity; and other health hazards. PFASs are found in numerous other consumer items including cookware, clothing, personal care products and cleaning products.

EWG's [2015 review](#) showed that the majority of PFAS in homes comes from its use on carpets and textiles. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control named carpet as the [number one exposure pathway to PFAS for infants and toddlers](#) who spend a lot of time lying, playing and crawling on carpeting. Adults can be exposed from inhalation or ingestion of dust, or dermal contact.

A [2012 study by University of Alberta researchers](#) documented exceptionally high levels of a short-chain PFAS chemical in the blood of a Canadian family that routinely treated its carpet with 3M's Scotchgard. The highest levels were observed in the youngest children. High levels of the same short-chain PFASs were detected in household dust and the family room carpet. [Earlier research by Health Canada](#) showed that the amounts of PFAS chemicals in household dust were directly related to the amount of carpeting in homes.

In 2017, the nonprofit Healthy Building Network [reported](#) that routine wear and tear, and any type of cleaning, dislodges PFAS chemicals from carpet fibers into air and dust. Amid mounting evidence on the hazards of these chemicals and questions on if we even need these chemicals, momentum is building to [eliminate this whole class of chemicals](#) from products.

Spurred by consumer demand and the possibility of regulations, some manufacturers have started exploring alternatives to PFAS chemicals in carpets. They're finding that carpet can be made easy to care for without toxic chemicals.

But finding information about PFAS-free carpets and rugs can be difficult. Many carpet products are not labeled and there is no comprehensive certification to ensure carpets are free of problematic PFAS chemicals. Some carpets in the U.S. are certified by Green Label Plus, which only tests for a narrow set of volatile organic compounds.

A few companies now sell PFAS-free carpets for commercial installation, but it is not certain when PFAS-free carpet will be available for residential purchases. California's Safer Consumer Products listing has moved the issue into the spotlight, and it is now up to manufacturers to respond.

EWG recommends:

- Minimizing the amount of carpet in your living space.
- Choosing wood or tile floors that can be easily cleaned to remove dust.
- Looking for natural fiber area rugs made of wool, jute, seagrass or sisal.
- If carpet is a must, looking for a wool carpet not treated with any additional chemicals.

- If you choose conventional carpet, telling the retailer you want one without fluorinated chemicals.
 - Vacuuming carpets frequently with a vacuum fitted with a HEPA filter to remove dust.
 - Visiting [EWG's Healthy Living: Home Guide](#) for more tips about choosing better carpet.
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[1] PFAS stands for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. These chemicals were historically known as PFCs, for per- and polyfluorinated compounds, a term still used sometimes.