# Serum testing for Perfluoroalkyl (or polyfluoroalkyl) substances (PFAS)

# Summary for General Practitioners

# (Guidance initially developed in February 2018, updated in November 2023)

|  |
| --- |
| **In late 2017, the Ministry for the Environment – Manatū Mō Te Taiao – began an all-of-Government programme to help councils and landowners to investigate the extent of PFAS contamination in New Zealand, and to guide them on managing this emerging contaminant. The Ministry of Health – Manatū Hauora – supported this work.**  **Crown sites, such as New Zealand Defence Force – Te Ope Kātua o Aotearoa – bases that have historically used fluorinated firefighting foams, undertook investigations. Regional councils around the country also undertook their own investigations into PFAS to understand the sites that may pose a risk to their communities, alongside other contaminated land issues.**  **More information about this work is available at:** <https://environment.govt.nz/publications/pfas-per-and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances/>  **The following information is adapted from the information provided to GPs in 2018.** |

**What is a serum PFAS test?**

A serum PFAS test is a blood test that can detect the amount of perfluoroalkyl (also known as polyfluoroalkyl) substances currently in a person’s blood. This indicates the amount of PFAS stored in a person’s body.

**What does a serum PFAS test involve?**

Two tubes (a minimum of 12 millilitres) of blood is taken. The blood must be taken at a medical laboratory so that it can be quickly processed. The processed blood sample is then sent to a laboratory with the facilities to test for PFAS. The results of the test will be sent to the person’s doctor. Generally, it can take at least two weeks before the results are available for doctors to talk to their patients.

**What can a serum PFAS test tell people about their exposure to PFAS?**

The test tells how much PFAS a person’s blood contains at the time the test was taken. It cannot accurately tell people what their past exposure was. A person who has had a high level of exposure in the past may have a serum PFAS test which shows low or minimal levels of PFAS now. The amount of PFAS in a person’s body slowly decreases over years if the person ceases to be exposed to significant amounts of PFAS.

**Is individual serum PFAS testing recommended?**

A serum PFAS test is not recommended because it:

* cannot give a likely cause for a current health condition
* cannot help manage a current health condition
* cannot reliably help to predict whether or not a health condition will develop in the future
* could mislead a person about their past exposure to PFAS
* could mislead a person about their current health risks.

There are also some difficulties in interpreting test results as New Zealand population data with which the results are compared are only available for people aged 19 to 64 years. These data are from a national serum study of persistent organic pollutants from blood taken in 2011-2013. All New Zealanders are expected to have some measurable PFAS in their blood given the widespread use of PFAS since the 1950s.

**Where can I get more information?**

If required, further advice on PFAS and health effects is available from Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora. Please contact your local medical officer of health if you wish to arrange this.

Information about the Ministry for the Environment led programme is available at: <https://environment.govt.nz/what-government-is-doing/areas-of-work/land/per-and-poly-fluoroalkyl-substances-pfas/>

**Updated in November 2023**