

Public Health Assessments

Today's complex environmental public health problems require a collaborative and coordinated response from multiple agencies, organizations and a variety of health professionals and scientists. The Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) works closely with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA), the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), local health departments and concerned communities to investigate and reduce the public health threat posed by chemical and physical hazards in the environment.

What is a public health assessment?

A public health assessment (PHA) reviews available data and information about possible chemical and physical hazards in the environment to assess any current or future impact on public health. If current or future exposure to a hazard exists, MDCH uses information about that hazard to decide whether that exposure is harmful. MDCH will also look into how the hazard can be stopped or reduced. The PHA process enables MDCH to identify additional steps needed to answer public health questions and outline follow-up actions needed to protect public health.

Who conducts public health assessments?

MDCH conducts PHAs under a cooperative agreement with ATSDR. MDCH carries out public health activities (assessments, consultations, advisories, education and more) on behalf of ATSDR at sites of environmental contamination in Michigan.

Federal or state agencies, like US EPA or MDEQ, local governments or local health departments may request MDCH's help with sites of environmental contamination, releases or accidental spills.

Who is ATSDR?

ATSDR is the federal public health agency responsible for evaluating the effects of exposure to chemical or physical hazards on human health.

ATSDR's mission is to serve the public by using the best environmental science, take responsive public health actions and provide health information to prevent harmful exposures and disease related to chemical and physical hazards.

To learn more about ATSDR and its work with state health departments visit www.atsdr.cdc.gov/states/.

What are the steps in a PHA?

To conduct a PHA, the following steps need to be completed:

- *Evaluating exposure:* MDCH evaluates all available environmental data and materials about conditions at the site. This includes the amount of chemicals present; where the chemicals are found (air, water, soil or food); if there are any physical hazards; and how people might be exposed. MDCH typically does not collect the environmental data. The data is provided by other state or federal agencies like MDEQ or US EPA.
- *Evaluating health effects:* If the environmental data shows that people are or might be exposed to chemicals, MDCH uses information about those chemicals to decide whether that exposure could be harmful to human health. The evaluation of health effects focuses on public health, or the health impact on the community as a whole.
- *Developing recommendations:* In the PHA, MDCH makes conclusions for any possible health threat posed by a site. In addition, MDCH offers recommendations for reducing or eliminating human exposure to chemical or physical hazards. If there is an immediate health threat, MDCH will issue a public health advisory, warning people of the danger. MDCH will continue to work with the appropriate agencies to resolve the problem.
- *Involving communities:* The PHA process is an interactive process. Throughout the PHA process, MDCH looks at information from various government agencies and parties responsible for the site, and considers concerns from the affected community. During a public comment period, a draft PHA is open for review to the community. The public comment period allows members of the community to tell MDCH how well the PHA addresses their concerns. MDCH responds to the public's comments in the final PHA.

The PHA is **not** a regulatory document and does **not** evaluate or confirm compliance with laws. MDCH is **not** a regulatory agency. The PHA also does **not** provide medical advice to individuals. MDCH **cannot** provide you with medical advice. If you have specific health concerns, you should see a medical doctor.

For More Information

To learn more about public health assessments, contact the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) by calling **1-800-648-6942** or visiting www.michigan.gov/mdch-toxics.

