

EPA Announces Guidance to Communities on PCBs in Caulk of Buildings Constructed or Renovated Between 1950 and 1978

EPA to Gather Latest Science on PCBs in Caulk

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today announced a series of steps that building owners and school administrators should take to reduce exposure to PCBs that may be found in caulk in many buildings constructed or renovated between 1950 and 1978. The Agency is also conducting new research to better understand the risks posed by caulk containing PCBs. This research will guide EPA in making further recommendations on long-term measures to minimize exposure as well as steps to prioritize and carry out actions to remove the caulk to better protect public health.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are man-made chemicals that persist in the environment and were widely used in construction materials and electrical products prior to 1978. PCBs can affect the immune system, reproductive system, nervous system and endocrine system and are potentially cancer-causing if they build up in the body over long periods of time.

“PCBs have been banned for the last 30 years for most uses,” said EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. “But unfortunately high levels of PCBs are present in many buildings and facilities constructed prior to the PCB ban, including most recently some schools. We’re concerned about the potential risks associated with exposure to these PCBs and we’re recommending practical, common sense steps to reduce this exposure as we improve our understanding of the science. For building owners and administrators who want to take added and more aggressive immediate steps, EPA is providing additional guidance to help them identify the extent of potential risks and determine whether mitigation steps are necessary. Local communities and governments have constrained resources that make this a particularly challenging and sensitive situation.”

The Agency has created a website, www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk, with updated information on this issue. Concerned parties can also call an EPA hotline toll free at 1-888-835-5372.

Although Congress banned the manufacture and most uses of PCBs in 1976 and they were phased out in 1978, there is evidence that many buildings across the country constructed or renovated from 1950 to 1978 may have PCBs at high levels in the caulk around windows and door frames, between masonry columns and in other masonry building materials. Exposure to these PCBs may occur as a result of their release from the caulk into the air, dust, surrounding surfaces and soil and through direct contact. EPA has calculated prudent public health levels that maintain PCB exposures below the “reference dose” – the amount of PCB exposure that EPA does not believe will cause harm. Those levels vary depending on the age group and use assumptions about potential PCB exposures from other sources, such as diet.

Although this is a serious issue, the potential presence of PCBs in buildings should not be a cause for alarm. If buildings were erected or renovated between 1950 and 1978, EPA recommends that owners implement steps to minimize exposure to potentially contaminated caulk in the following ways:

- Cleaning air ducts
- Improving ventilation by opening windows and using or installing [exhaust] fans where possible
- Cleaning frequently to reduce dust and residue inside buildings
- Using a wet or damp cloth or mop to clean surfaces
- Not sweeping with dry brooms and minimizing the use of dusters in areas near potential PCB-containing caulk
- Using vacuums with high efficiency particulate air filters
- Washing hands with soap and water often, particularly before eating and drinking
- Washing children's toys often

EPA also recommends testing peeling, brittle, cracking or deteriorating caulk directly for the presence of PCBs and removing the caulk if PCBs are present at significant levels. Alternatively, the building owner can assume the PCBs are present and proceed directly to remove deteriorating caulk.

Building owners and facility managers should also consider testing to determine if PCB levels in the air exceed EPA's suggested public health levels. If testing reveals PCBs in the air above these levels, building owners should be especially vigilant in implementing and monitoring ventilation and hygienic practices to minimize exposures. Owners and managers are encouraged to retest PCB levels in air to determine whether these practices are reducing the potential for PCB exposures. Should these practices not reduce exposure, caulk and other known sources of PCBs should be removed as soon as practicable.

There are several unresolved scientific issues that must be better understood to assess the magnitude of the problem and identify the best long-term solutions. For example, the link between the concentrations of PCBs in caulk and PCBs in the air or dust is not well understood. The Agency is doing research to determine the sources and levels of PCBs in buildings in the U.S. and to evaluate different strategies to reduce exposures. The results of this research will be used to provide further guidance to building owners as they develop and implement long-term solutions.

Where buildings were constructed or renovated between 1950 and 1978, EPA recommends that PCB-containing caulk be removed during planned renovations and repairs (when replacing windows, doors, roofs, ventilation, etc.) It is critically important to ensure that PCBs are not released to air during replacement or repair of caulk in affected buildings. EPA is recommending simple, commonsense work practices to prevent the release of PCBs during these operations. More information can be found at www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk.

EPA will work directly with owners and managers facing serious problems, to help them develop a practical approach to reduce exposures and prioritize the removal of caulk.

Anyone seeking technical guidance should contact the EPA at: **1-888-835-5372**.

For more information:
www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk

For more information on PCBs in the U.S., visit: www.cdc.gov/nceh or www.cdc.gov/atsdr

Toll free number: 1-888-835-5372

###