



November 6, 2020

The Honorable Daniel T. Kildee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Kildee:

Thank you for your letter to the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), Alex M. Azar II, regarding concerns about potential risks the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) may pose for individuals who have been exposed to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). I am responding on behalf of Secretary Azar.

This is an important issue for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), and there is a lot more we can learn through further research. CDC and ATSDR are assessing the intersection between PFAS exposure and COVID-19, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

During this public health emergency and pandemic, HHS and its federal partners are periodically providing Congressional briefings to keep policymakers up to date on developments. We hope that you and your staff take advantage of these opportunities to get answers to your most pressing questions. Please contact Nancy Tourk in our CDC Washington Office at (202) 245-0600 or [ntourk@cdc.gov](mailto:ntourk@cdc.gov) if you have further questions.

We have provided answers to your questions in the attached Enclosure. The National Institutes of Health also reviewed and provided input to the Enclosure.

Thank you for the work you do to protect the American people and for your interest in this ongoing response. We appreciate your support, and that of Congress, as we all work together to fight COVID-19. CDC remains committed to protecting the American public during this pandemic. A copy of this response is also being sent to the co-signers of your letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert R. Redfield MD".

Robert R. Redfield, MD  
Director, CDC and  
Administrator, ATSDR

Enclosure

**Answer to Questions Related to Potential risks Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) may pose for individuals who have been exposed to PFAS**

**1. What work is HHS currently undertaking to better understand the risks associated with COVID-19 in communities with high levels of exposure to PFAS? Are there any chemicals or known contaminants that HHS is concerned may put people at greater risk of adverse health outcomes from COVID-19?**

CDC and ATSDR are assessing the intersection between PFAS exposure and COVID-19, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). CDC is currently implementing a study that will look at COVID-19 among healthcare personnel and first responders. As part of this study, ATSDR is planning to measure PFAS serum concentrations in participants to determine the association between serum PFAS concentrations and the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection and subsequent COVID-19.

**2. What plans does the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), or any other institute within NIH have to utilize funding for research to examine the relationship between COVID-19 and PFAS exposure – including COVID-19 risks for individuals and communities who have been exposed to PFAS?**

In recognition of the urgent need to understand the impact of environmental exposures—including to PFAS—on COVID-19 and its causative agent, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2), the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on April 9, 2020, issued a Notice of Special Interest (NOSI)<sup>1</sup> inviting applications for research to address this need. NIEHS is prepared to fund responsive research through two means: first, as an administrative supplement to existing grantees that incorporate COVID-19 pertinent questions in their research, and second, through the award of new grants from new proposals using the time-sensitive mechanism whereby NIEHS seeks to process applications for decision within three to four months as compared to the average of nine months for the typical NIH grant review and award process. The first NIEHS time-sensitive awards resulting from this NOSI were anticipated in September 2020.

Along with this NIEHS-issued NOSI, NIEHS is participating in additional funding opportunity announcements issued at NIH to solicit competitive proposals to fund COVID-19-related research with environmental exposures being among several determinants of health taken into consideration. Specifically, NIEHS is participating in one relevant NOSI<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notice of Special Interest (NOSI): NIEHS Support for Understanding the Impact of Environmental Exposures on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). NIH Notice Number: NOT-ES-20-015. April 9, 2020. Internet: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-ES-20-015.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Notice of Special Interest (NOSI): Competitive and Administrative Supplements for Community Interventions to Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on Health Disparity and Other Vulnerable Populations. NIH

and one relevant program announcement<sup>3</sup> with a social, behavioral and economic focus. These announcements encourage research with NIH-designated health disparity populations and other vulnerable groups on community interventions to address the adverse psychosocial, behavioral, and socioeconomic effects of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19. Applications are sought to test: (1) the impacts of mitigation strategies to prevent COVID-19 transmission and acquisition, and (2) already implemented, new, or adapted interventions to address the adverse consequences of the pandemic on the health of these groups. In particular, “environmentally vulnerable communities that are exposed to high rates of air pollution or other toxic exposures”—which could include communities affected by PFAS exposure—are specifically mentioned in both of these announcements.

**3. Are ATSDR, CDC, NIH, and other agencies within HHS capable of leveraging data already being collected on PFAS exposure? If so, are these agencies capable of conducting antibody or other serological tests on willing voluntary participants within the ongoing PFAS studies, in a way that is sensitive to patients’ rights, to further examine the relationship between exposure to PFAS and COVID-19?**

The study described in Question 1 (above) will also evaluate the association of PFAS levels and antibody response to SARS-CoV-2, infection, and waning of antibodies over time, which may shed light on the potential impact of PFAS exposure on vaccine response and potential duration of vaccine protection.

In addition, CDC and ATSDR are exploring how to incorporate investigator-initiated COVID-19 research into the current multi-site PFAS study. The study is in eight states across the U.S. and is a potential mechanism to examine the association between PFAS and COVID-19 in communities. Information could be collected from participants regarding symptoms, exposure, and treatment since January 2020. This information may assist with determining if there is an association between PFAS exposure and antibody responses among those with documented (or presumed) prior SARS-CoV-2 infection. As CDC and ATSDR have done throughout their work on PFAS, the agencies will work to ensure that all research is conducted consistent with applicable federal privacy laws and human subjects protections.

**4. Do the agencies need additional resources to support research into the relationship/interaction between PFAS exposure and COVID-19 beyond the funds provided thus far through regular Fiscal Year 2020 appropriations and supplemental funding made available through COVID-19 response legislation?**

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Notice Number: NOT-MD-20-022. June 5, 2020.

Internet: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/not-md-20-022.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Program Announcement (PAR): Community Interventions to Address the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic among Health Disparity and Vulnerable Populations (R01- Clinical Trial Optional). NIH Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) Number: PAR-20-237. June 17, 2020.  
Internet: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-20-237.html>.

## Enclosure

CDC greatly appreciates the funding provided through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and other supplemental appropriations bills. There are many important research questions that need to be answered, and we are considering the appropriate prioritization of research related to COVID-19.

With respect to NIEHS, absent any Congressional appropriations being made specific to understanding the impact of environmental exposures on COVID-19 and SARS-Cov-2, NIEHS is compelled to review applications for grant funding it receives in this space in competition with all other meritorious applications it receives on the full range of scientifically valid questions that fall within the environmental health sciences domain. While NIEHS issued a Notice of Special Interest in April to address the urgent need for mission-relevant research related to COVID-19, NIEHS has not received any supplemental appropriations enacted into law by Congress to fund such research or been among the seven Institutes at NIH that, as of this writing, have received direct supplemental appropriations for research. Accordingly, NIEHS is utilizing its existing resources and base appropriation to fund competitive awards to help advance knowledge about relationships between environmental exposures and COVID-19.