

information on each chemical to find any expected health effects.

**Determining**, for chemicals present in amounts above national guidelines, if there are any exposure pathways.

**Identifying and recommending** actions needed to protect public health.

**Reviewing** our work. The Florida DOH, the Florida DEP, the community's county health department, the federal EPA and the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) in Atlanta all review our reports before they go to the community. The community and others, including the property owners, also are requested to review the document. The Florida DOH responds to all suggestions, requests, comments, and questions.

**Publicizing** our findings to the public, especially through newspapers and television.

**Seeking** further community input on the draft document. There is a public comment period usually running for about 30 days. The Public Comment period can be longer if the community needs more time.

**Holding** public meetings or forums to discuss findings, distribute draft documents, and get community input.

**Correcting** the draft, analyzing suggestions, and researching community concerns.

**Publishing and distributing** the final document.

**Direct mail**, both to give information and to seek input.

**Community Assistance Panels**, or Workgroups, which inform the Florida DOH about community concerns, or how to best educate and inform affected residents.

**Informing and educating** healthcare professionals in the community.

**Public Meetings** where community members can meet as a group with involved agencies.

**Availability Sessions** where community members can talk directly with the Florida DOH, the Florida DEP, or the U.S. EPA staff actually working on the site.

**Meetings** with community organizations and school groups who request it.

**Regular** information releases to the news media covering the affected area.

We do not use all of these ways to communicate at every site.

### What is the connection between the Florida DOH and the U.S. ATSDR?

The ATSDR contracts and partners with Florida to do public health assessments and education associated with hazardous waste sites. The U.S. ATSDR is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The federal ATSDR funds 100% of the Florida DOH work at hazardous waste sites. This includes the cost of this brochure, approximately 75 cents each.

### What part does the community play concerning hazardous waste sites?

The community plays the most important role in the Public Health Assessment process. Two-way communication between the public and the involved agencies is vital and necessary. The Florida DOH uses many ways to give information and get community input. Here are a few:

**Telephone** surveys of a portion of area residents. We usually call a sample of residents living nearby a site.

# What is a Public Health Assessment?

The Florida DOH has a Toll Free telephone line for residents to call without cost during business hours:

**1-877-798-2772**



Bureau of Community Environmental Health  
4052 Bald Cypress Way, Bin #A-08  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1712  
Local calls: (850) 245-4299

[www.doh.state.fl.us](http://www.doh.state.fl.us)

Click on Subject List, then Hazardous Waste Sites

DH 150-765, 9/06

examining all  
chemicals found  
at a hazardous  
waste site in terms  
of potential  
health effects

## What is a Public Health Assessment?

The Florida Department of Health (DOH) protects and promotes the health of people living around hazardous waste sites. The Florida DOH examines all chemicals found at a hazardous waste site in terms of their potential health effects, and informs the public of its findings. The Public Health Assessment looks at all information available at the time on all the specific chemicals at a specific site. It evaluates whether exposure to those substances, in those amounts, might cause harm to people. A Public Health Assessment usually takes about one year to complete.

The first drafts of the Public Health Assessment report go to other involved agencies and to the public for their input or corrections. The Florida DOH asks the community to make comments, add history, or ask questions throughout the process. When the draft is corrected and changes are added, the Florida DOH sends out the final document.

Can this substance, in this amount, potentially harm people?

## When does the Florida DOH start a Public Health Assessment?

The Florida DOH starts a Public Health Assessment when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) puts the site on its National Priorities List (NPL). The NPL is a special U.S. EPA list of national hazardous waste sites. Generally, these sites need cleanup but no adequate funding is available. NPL classification gives the U.S. EPA the power to clean the site up without a guarantee of funding.

## More about the Public Health Assessment

A Public Health Assessment is not the same thing as a medical exam or a community health study.

It looks at the types of chemicals and how much of them were found at a site. It checks this information against the known levels where human health effects could occur. A Public Health Assessment focuses on the present and the future. There is usually not much information or data from the past on

the chemicals used or the levels. Occasionally there is enough data from the past to make an estimate of possible effects from past exposures, if any.

Almost any substance can be harmful at a certain level. Chemicals range from a commonly known poison such as arsenic to less threatening substances such as common table salt. A health risk assessor must know the exact substance and the exact amount of it that was present. “The poison is in the dose,” means that a chemical may not be harmful until it reaches a certain amount. A health assessor cannot know if it could have any health effect until he or she knows the actual amount of the chemical that was present. When this information is not available, the possible health effects cannot be known. In the past, little was known about the effects of substances on people. As a result, almost no one kept records of exactly what chemicals were used or how much of each was mixed in.

## What does a Public Health Assessment consider?

A Public Health Assessment considers many aspects of a hazardous waste site. Some of the main questions it asks are the following:

- What are the levels, or amounts, of hazardous substances present?
- Can this substance, in this amount, potentially cause harm to people?
- Can people be exposed to, or come in contact with, these substances?
- Are there any dangers to people such as unsafe buildings or other physical hazards on the site?

When making public safety decisions about hazardous waste sites, the Florida DOH uses the guidelines that apply to the most sensitive persons in the community. These include the children, the elderly, and pregnant or nursing mothers.

To make a health risk estimate, the Florida DOH uses these three main sources of information.

**Community** concerns, reports, and questions concerning how the site affects people’s health or quality of life.

A  
Public Health  
Assessment  
is the best way we can  
make sure you are safe  
and secure in your  
environment.

**Environmental** data that is already available. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the U.S. EPA gather and analyze samples. The Florida DOH uses the data gathered by these and others, such as county environmental offices. The Florida DOH usually does not do sampling.

**Health** data may be used, such as the rates of illness and deaths in the community.

Health assessors also use the Florida Cancer Data Survey, a data system tracking cancer diagnoses and deaths in Florida. This data on the specific community is compared with state and national rates.

## What is an Exposure Pathway?

Chemicals are found in air, soil, and water, both surface water and underground water. Underground water is called “groundwater.” If the Florida DOH finds contamination in any of the three media—air, soil, and water—they look to see if there are any ways people can come into contact with it. If there is a way people can come into contact with the chemical, that way is called the “exposure pathway.” Examples of pathways are people breathing contaminated air, drinking contaminated water, or eating something with contaminated soil on it or on their hands.

Can people be exposed to or come in contact with these substances?

## What is an Exposure Investigation?

The Florida DOH conducts Exposure Investigations at some sites. An Exposure Investigation checks the urine or blood from an exposed person to see if traces of the chemicals are present. There are limitations on when an Exposure Investigation may be done, however. This is mainly because not all chemicals leave traces science can detect. Of those that can be detected, current technology can detect them only if the exposure was recent.

## How do other agencies and the public use a Public Health Assessment?

Public Health Assessments identify and recommend actions needed to protect public health. Examples could be a recommendation to fence off an area, or educate a

Are there any dangers to people on the site?

community on the hazardous waste problem and how to protect themselves.

The Florida DOH uses the Public Health Assessment to respond to community concerns. Throughout the health assessment process, the Florida DOH talks with

people living or working near the site. The Florida DOH seeks out what the community is concerned about. The Florida DOH meets individually with residents, with civic and action groups, with local leaders, the media, and health professionals.

The Florida DOH makes recommendations about actions needed to protect public health, but has no regulating power at hazardous waste sites. The Florida DOH informs the community of its findings and encourages them to stay involved. The cleanup agencies, the federal EPA, the Florida DEP, local governments, and the property owners, usually follow the Florida DOH recommendations.

## What are the stages of a Public Health Assessment?

When a site is ready to be proposed to the NPL, the Public Health Assessment activities begin. The entire process takes about a year. The following stages are the primary steps for conducting a Public Health Assessment:

**Gathering** data from all known sources: History of the site, background and community information, all of the sampling data, and all known geological information.

**Seeking** ongoing input from the community, especially about their health concerns.

**Analyzing** data, checking amounts and other

What are the levels, or amounts, of hazardous substances present?