Widespread Cancer-Causing Pollution Places Georgia's Carpet Industry Under Scrutiny

Media outlets explore the prevalence of forever chemicals—which are linked to cancer—in Georgia's carpet manufacturing region. [VIDEO]

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Known as the carpet capital of the world Dalton, Georgia, has been home to thriving carpet and textile industries for generations. This northwest region of the state has also become heavily polluted with polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), better known as forever chemicals. Now, the carpet and chemical industries are under investigation by multiple news outlets, including The Atlanta Journal–Constitution, The Associated Press and PBS's Frontline.

For the Frontline documentary Contaminated: The Carpet Industry's Toxic Legacy, scientists across the United States and journalists from Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina teamed up to uncover the extent of PFAS contamination in the environment and the health impacts to locals via contaminated drinking water.

"PFAS chemicals became basically intertwined with carpet manufacture on a deep level since the 1970s and into the '80s and beyond," says environmental scientist Steve Amter in the documentary. (Click on the link at the top of this article to watch the complete 53-minute film or view it on YouTube.)

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), PFAS, of which there are thousands of kinds, are widely used chemicals whose components break down very slowly over time. Because of their widespread use and presence in water, air and soil, they can be found at low levels in the blood of people and animals. Common sources of PFAS include some animal products, food packaging, household cleaning products, non-stick cookware, shampoo and dental floss, among many others.

For decades, carpet companies treated their products with Scotchgard and other stain-and-oil

resistant chemicals containing PFAS. In the early 2000s, the EPA's concern about the unknown health and environmental impacts of such chemicals prompted some chemical manufacturers to alter their formulas. Still, carpet companies were able to switch between different versions of the stain-and-oil resistant products to evade loose state and federal regulations.

Since 2000, scientists have uncovered many of the environmental and health risks related to forever chemicals. Exposure to certain levels of PFAS can lead to reproductive issues, developmental delays in children, increased risk for cancer (including prostate, kidney and testicular cancers), increased risk for obesity, compromised immune response or disruption of natural hormones, according to the EPA.

Wastewater from the carpet manufacturing process contaminated nearby rivers and drinking water, putting people living near carpet mills and downstream of contaminated water sources at risk for increased PFAS levels in their blood.

Environmental scientists at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health tested PFAS levels in the blood of nearly 200 Dalton-area residents.

"24% of them had PFAS levels that were above the level of high risk of health outcomes, and 74% percent were in the moderate-risk area," said research professor Dana Barr, PhD, in an PBS interview. "We want to figure out how they're being exposed, how they're being most exposed, and try to reduce those exposures over time."

The Frontline documentary highlighted people in Barr's study who lived near or worked in carpet mills and were diagnosed with fatty liver disease, thyroid issues and autoimmune disorders.

Both the documentary and an AP article discuss the dispute over who is responsible for the contamination: the carpet industry or the chemical industry. Some families in Georgia are now suing carpet companies over the contamination.

The EPA still does not know to what extent the average person has been exposed to PFAS, how to reduce PFAS in the environment, how to remove PFAS from drinking water or how to properly dispose of the chemicals.

The Biden administration established PFAS drinking water standards in 2024, but the Trump administration plans to roll back and delay the enforcement of some of these water regulations.

To learn more about the regulation and health impacts of PFAS, click #forever chemicals and #PFAS to read stories such as “The Cost of Freeing Drinking Water from ‘Forever Chemicals’” and “More States Ban PFAS, or ‘Forever Chemicals,’ in More Products.”

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