**Headline:** Toxic Chemicals in Food Packaging Weaken Our Immune System Response to COVID-19—When Will Congress Ban Them?

**Teaser:** A new federal bill would advance public and environmental health by banning toxic chemicals from food packaging.

By Melissa Kravitz Hoeffner

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**[Article Body:]**

While so many Americans have taken all necessary precautions to keep themselves and those around them safe from COVID-19 and prevent severe illness if they do get sick with the virus, there are plenty of other factors in Americans’ daily lives that are beyond their control that may actually worsen the effects of the novel coronavirus and especially result in the vulnerable population being more [susceptible](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8535293/) to the virus despite their best efforts to get vaccinated and boosted and ensure they are masked up and are socially distanced from others.

Chemicals commonly found in consumer products have been proven to harm human health, yet they still remain legal stateside. Endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), which negatively affect human hormones, can [exacerbate COVID-19 in particularly vulnerable individuals](https://www.healthandenvironment.org/webinars/96526), yet these EDCs can be hard to avoid for any American consumer. “Certain underlying chronic conditions associated with exposures to… [endocrine-disrupting] chemicals (EDCs) are exacerbating the effects of COVID-19 in vulnerable populations,” [confirmed](https://www.healthandenvironment.org/webinars/96526) the Collaborative on Health and the Environment.

PFAS (short for perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances), which are [frequently](https://www.endocrine.org/topics/edc/what-edcs-are/common-edcs/pfas) found in food packaging and mass-manufactured goods, like cosmetics, are an EDC.

According to a June 2020 [article](https://theintercept.com/2020/06/26/coronavirus-toxic-chemicals-pfas-bpa/) in the Intercept, “Studies have shown that in both adults and children higher levels of certain PFAS chemicals were associated with weaker responses to vaccines. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a division of the CDC, recognized this evidence in an [announcement](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/health-effects/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.atsdr.cdc.gov%2Fpfas%2FPFAS-health-effects.html) it recently posted to its website on the ‘potential intersection between PFAS exposure and COVID-19.’”

“[PFAS chemicals](https://www.ewg.org/pfaschemicals/) are a family of chemicals that are widely used in industrial and consumer product applications, and commonly used to make water-, grease- and stain-repellent coatings,” explains [David Andrews](https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/our-experts/david-andrews-phd), PhD, a senior scientist at the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a nonprofit public health advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. “PFAS chemicals are very stable and impervious to breakdown, giving them what is often considered to be a performance advantage in many products. This apparent advantage of chemical and physical stability is what has led to widespread global contamination [by PFAS] and [has provided them with] their ability to cause human health harm.”

These toxins are pervasive in everyday life, but a [PFAS ban for food packaging](https://www.natlawreview.com/article/pfas-ban-food-packaging-proposed), proposed in Congress in late 2021, can help limit everyday exposure to the toxins. The [Keep Food Containers Safe from PFAS Act](https://www.hassan.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/PFAS%20Food%20Packaging%20Ban%20Bill.FINAL.pdf) is a bipartisan effort, introduced in the [Senate](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/3169) by Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and in the [House of Representatives](https://debbiedingell.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=3288) by Representative Debbie Dingell (D-MI) and Representative Don Young (R-AK). If the bill passes, it is expected to be enacted by January 1, 2024.

A PFAS ban is “long overdue and [is] hopefully the first of many,” says [Calloway Cook](https://illuminatelabs.org/pages/calloway-cook), president of [Illuminate Labs](https://illuminatelabs.org/), a dietary supplements company. “It’s unfortunate that many packaged food products in the U.S. contain compounds that are known to be harmful to human health but remain legal to use,” he adds. “The FDA and Congress should review the medical literature on more compounds like PFAS and err on the side of caution, [and look at] banning all compounds that have proven toxicity in animal studies at doses achievable through regular use… The cost to switch to more sustainable alternatives is not much, even with plastics, but most businesses are not focused on long-term environmental effects. It’s absolutely the role of Congress to better regulate the food industry, and I hope the bill banning PFAS is the first of many similar bills.”

Andrews agrees, [saying](https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/news-release/2021/11/bill-ban-forever-chemicals-food-packaging-would-eliminate-major) in an EWG press release, “The Keep Food Containers Safe from PFAS Act would quickly cut off a potential major and completely avoidable source of exposure to these forever chemicals.”

PFAS are widely used because they [offer](https://www.epa.gov/pfas/our-current-understanding-human-health-and-environmental-risks-pfas) a solution to consumer packaging, but what could be used instead? “With hundreds to thousands of PFAS chemicals, it is likely that there will be a significant, if not similar, number of alternative chemicals or alternatives needed to fully replace PFAS,” explains Andrews, emphasizing that where safer alternatives exist, they should be used instead of PFAS as soon as possible. In other cases, alternatives may need to be developed, and should potentially be incentivized. For example, medical devices, which are essential to human health and safety, should absolutely not have toxins in them. But that is unfortunately [not](https://news.3m.com/PFAS-in-the-Medical-Industry#:~:text=These%20include%3A,also%20used%20for%20repairing%20hernias.) the case.

Still, replacing PFAS with non-detrimental alternatives isn’t that simple. “Many of the PFAS being used today are replacements for different PFAS chemicals such as PFOA [perfluorooctanoic acid] and PFOS [perfluorooctane sulfonic acid] that were used decades ago,” Andrews explains. “Many of the [regulations phasing out](https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/news/new-generation-forever-chemicals-toxicity-exposure-contamination-and-regulation) the use of PFAS, such as the Washington state [ban](https://www.natlawreview.com/article/washington-state-to-ban-pfas-four-types-food-packaging) of PFAS in food packaging, require an alternative assessment to ensure that the replacements [provided] are safer [than the original options].” This certainly explains why it would be difficult to ban PFAS immediately, even after knowing the health risks involved in using them: they help support consumerism.

The Environmental Protection Agency is currently [investigating more than 1,000 completely legal PFAS chemicals](https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-continues-take-action-pfas-protect-public), which is worrisome for environmental and human health. Introducing regulations for various industries, such as food packaging, cosmetics and textiles, will help curb the use of PFAS and halt further contamination and sickness related to these chemicals. To check if you live in an area contaminated by PFAS and should take precautions, such as filtering your tap water, the EWG offers an online [interactive map](https://www.ewg.org/interactive-maps/pfas_contamination/) as well as expert-sourced tips on [avoiding PFAS exposure](https://static.ewg.org/ewg-tip-sheets/EWG-AvoidingPFCs.pdf).

And just as it is not always possible to avoid all sources of COVID-19, avoiding all potential sources of PFAS isn’t always as easy as it may sound. Research by Greenpeace in 2016 [found](https://static.ewg.org/ewg-tip-sheets/EWG-AvoidingPFCs.pdf) PFAS contaminants in jackets made by environmentally focused brands like the [North Face](https://www.nrdc.org/experts/yiliqi/north-face-and-timberland-recognize-pfas-threat-apparel), which plans to [phase out PFAS by 2025](https://d1io3yog0oux5.cloudfront.net/vfc/files/documents/Sustainability/VF_Reducing_Our_Chemical_Footprint.pdf), and [Patagonia](https://www.insidehook.com/article/gear/waterproof-gear-bad-environment), which aims to ensure that 85 percent of its garments are “[PFAS-free by the end of 2022](https://www.insidehook.com/article/gear/waterproof-gear-bad-environment)”; in 2014, Greenpeace found [PFAS in more than 80 articles of clothing](https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-thailand-stateless-release/2019/09/192afd2f-a-little-story-about-the-monsters-in-your-closet-technical-report.pdf), including footwear, that were purchased in 2013. Finding a water-repellent, affordable and [PFAS-free](https://www.wired.com/story/pfas-free-waterproof-apparel/) raincoat may not be easy, but cutting back on greasy food packed in PFAS-treated containers or wrappers (such as for fast food and microwave popcorn) and preparing food in [non-PFAS treated nonstick cookware](https://www.ecocenter.org/undisclosed-pfas-coatings-common-cookware-research-shows)—a currently available alternative you could try is learning to cook with a cast-iron skillet or Dutch oven, for example—may help. Still, with the proliferation of PFAS use in so many aspects of Americans’ daily lives, the responsibility for substantial change lies most heavily with the government, which has the power to make legislative changes to curb companies’ reliance on PFAS. As it stands, Americans live in a nation where it is very difficult to avoid PFAS exposure and its harms.

“It is imperative that regulations move forward to limit future harm from PFAS chemicals based on what we know about the extreme toxicity and potent risk that these chemicals pose for human health,” says Andrews. “Regulations should be enacted quickly to stop any ongoing industrial discharges and [to] eliminate approval of new PFAS that may pose risks to health or the environment.”