

Children's Health at Risk as the EPA Retreats on Harmful Pollution

Federal leaders are pulling back safeguards designed to stop pollution before it reaches children

Parents will do **everything they can** to keep their children healthy and safe. But they can't keep toxic chemicals out of their water, pollution out of the air, or pesticides out of their food.

We know more than ever about how pollution harms children. **Yet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is dismantling key safeguards that protect them.**

Children encounter pollution at home, at school, and outdoors—**even before they are born.**

Parents can't stop mercury, arsenic, formaldehyde, soot, or smog-forming pollution from pouring out of a power-plant smokestack. They can't track when industrial facilities release PFAS "forever chemicals" or heavy metals. And they can't make federal decisionmakers weigh the harm to developing bodies when setting protections.

Families depend on federal scientists, toxicologists, chemists, engineers and public-health experts to spot these risks and put safeguards in place before children are exposed. Those protections should put children's health, and the costs families bear when pollution makes them sick, ahead of industry's cost of controlling its own pollution.

This Children's Health Month, there are **three federal changes underway that could** increase children's exposure to pollution or leave their health less protected.

- EPA and other federal agencies have taken more than 30 actions that make it easier for companies to build and power energy-hungry AI data centers—including weakening, bypassing, and delaying pollution protections;
- EPA is weakening protections against PFAS, pesticides and other harmful pollution; and
- EPA is making major pollution decisions without fully accounting for babies' and children's heightened vulnerability.



CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH: THE SCALE

- **33.5 million** U.S. children live in counties receiving an F for at least one measure of ozone or particle pollution.
- **~500,000** U.S. children have levels of lead in their blood at or above CDC's reference value. *(Reference value is not a safety threshold; no safe blood lead level in children has been identified.)*
- **~96%** of U.S. adolescents had four or more PFAS detected in their blood in nationally representative 2017–March 2020 data.
- **Nearly 2.4 million** children with asthma live in counties receiving an F for at least one measure of air pollution.

DEVELOPING BRAINS & BODIES

Children are not small adults. Their brains, lungs, immune systems, and other organs are still developing. Pound for pound, they breathe more air, drink more water, and eat more food than adults. Pollution they encounter before birth and during childhood can affect their health and development for years to come. Young children also spend more time on floors and the ground and frequently put their hands and objects in their mouths, increasing their contact with contaminated dust and soil. Some exposures can begin even earlier, crossing the placenta before birth or reaching infants through breast milk.

These pollutants can do lasting harm to children:

- **Lead** | permanent effects on developing brains, lower IQ, learning and attention problems.
- **Mercury** | damage to fetal and childhood brain development, including effects on learning, memory and attention.
- **Formaldehyde** | irritation of the lungs, worsened asthma, and increased cancer risk.
- **Arsenic** | linked to developmental and cognitive harm, and cancer.
- **Fine-particle pollution & ozone** | asthma attacks, respiratory illness, and impaired lung development.
- **PFAS** | impact on brain development and behavior, lower birth weight, immune-system effects, hormone disruption, and increased risks of some cancers.
- **Some pesticides and industrial chemicals** | harm to brain and nervous system development, reproductive, hormonal or cancer risks, depending on the chemical and exposure.

THE AIR CHILDREN BREATHE

The rapid expansion of AI data centers is creating enormous new electricity demand—and potentially significant new sources of air pollution from on-site generators and the power plants needed to meet that demand. Fine-particle pollution and ozone from these sources can worsen asthma and impair children's lung development. Mercury and other toxic metals can harm developing brains and nervous systems.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

- **EPA is making it easier for data centers and technology companies to add or operate fossil-fueled power sources serving growing data-center demand.** The agency has expanded flexibility for some gas and diesel generators and proposed changes that would allow some construction to begin before final major air permits are issued. If rising data-center electricity demand is met with more fossil fuel power generation, that can mean more soot, smog-forming pollution, and other pollutants that worsen asthma and threaten developing lungs.
- **EPA has also proposed eliminating federal minimum requirements for public notice and comment on some smaller air permits.** With fewer guaranteed opportunities for public input, child-specific concerns, such as pollution near schools or risks to children with asthma, may be less likely to be raised before projects are approved.
- **EPA weakened limits on mercury and other toxic pollution from coal-fired power plants.** EPA repealed requirements issued in 2024 that would have required plants to further reduce mercury and hazardous metals such as arsenic and lead and required continuous pollution monitoring. EPA put a dollar value on what industry would save, but not on the health benefits of reducing mercury and other toxic metals.
- **EPA rolled back power-plant standards that were expected to prevent asthma and missed school days.** The 2024 standards would have cut climate pollution from power plants while also reducing soot and smog. EPA's own 2024 analysis projected about **1,900 fewer new asthma cases, 360,000 fewer asthma-symptom episodes and 48,000 fewer missed school days in 2035.** EPA has repealed most of those protections and proposed eliminating the rest.



- **EPA is asking the Supreme Court to overturn stronger limits on fine-particle air pollution (soot).** Fine-particle pollution can trigger asthma attacks, impair lung development, and contribute to other serious health problems. A lower court upheld the stronger health protections set in 2024 but EPA is now siding with industry groups seeking to strike them down.

WHY IT MATTERS

Nationwide, at least **188 schools** are within three miles of proposed gas-fired power plants dedicated to data centers. Proximity alone does not establish exposure or harm, but it underscores the need for project-specific pollution estimates, monitoring, disclosure, and public review.

Independent researchers using an EPA health model estimate that, under one high-growth 2028 scenario, data-center-related air pollution could contribute to roughly **600,000 asthma-symptom cases and 1,300 premature deaths annually** across the population. Most of the modeled national health burden comes from the power plants supplying data-center electricity rather than generators at the data centers themselves. (source: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2412.06288>)

The Child-Specific Health Toll Isn't Being Counted

EPA's health-modeling tools can estimate child-specific outcomes such as childhood asthma and missed school days. Yet EPN found no public federal analysis calculating what pollution associated with the data-center buildout could mean specifically for children, including pollution from both on-site generation and the power plants supplying data centers.

The independent national study gives us a picture of the overall health risks. But its published results do not tell families or policymakers how many children could develop asthma, experience asthma symptoms, or miss school as a result.

This information gap means families and policymakers still don't have a clear picture of what this rapidly growing electricity demand could mean specifically for children's health.

THE WATER CHILDREN DRINK & FOOD THEY EAT

PFAS "forever chemicals" can move from industrial facilities into wastewater and stormwater, through sewage-treatment plants, into rivers and drinking-water sources, and into sewage sludge spread on farmland.

Some PFAS can cross the placenta, and exposure to certain PFAS has been associated with developmental, reproductive, and immune-system effects. Once PFAS has reached drinking water, sewage sludge, soil, or food production, preventing exposure becomes far harder. That is why controlling PFAS farther upstream matters.

Children can be exposed to pesticides through the food they eat, the water they drink, and the air they breathe. Some can harm developing brains and nervous systems, while others have been linked to cancer and other long-term health problems. Protecting children requires EPA to consider all the ways they may be exposed and, when pesticides can harm the body in similar ways, how those exposures can add up.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

- **EPA pulled back a federal strategy for stopping PFAS pollution at industrial sources.** EPA rescinded its own 2022 guidance that gave states and wastewater authorities a roadmap for finding major industrial PFAS sources and using monitoring, pretreatment and pollution-prevention measures to reduce releases. Once PFAS reaches municipal wastewater systems, it can move into waterways or remain in sewage sludge that may later be spread on land.
- **EPA proposed eliminating drinking-water protections for several PFAS “forever chemicals.”** The proposal would remove federal limits for PFHxS, PFNA, GenX chemicals and mixtures covered by the PFAS Hazard Index. Exposure to certain PFAS has been associated with developmental and immune-system effects, and children can receive greater doses of contaminants in drinking water relative to their body size.
- **EPA proposed giving some water systems two more years to meet the PFOA and PFOS limits.** While PFOA and PFOS limits still exist, under this proposal, eligible systems could wait until 2031 instead of 2029 to comply, meaning some communities could wait longer for their drinking water to meet the federal standards.
- **EPA found potential health risks from PFAS-contaminated sewage sludge but stopped short of enforceable protections.** Sewage sludge spread on farms and other land can contain PFOA and PFOS, creating pathways into soil, water, crops and animals. EPA’s own guidance warns against spreading contaminated sludge where children play or on crops that could increase people’s exposure. Yet EPA has not finalized its risk assessment or set enforceable national PFAS limits for sewage sludge, relying instead on voluntary recommendations.
- **EPA approved a new pesticide for food and lawns despite questions about risks to children and developing fetuses.** Isocycloseram can now be used on food crops and lawns around homes. Animal studies reviewed by EPA found reproductive harms and liver damage, while other regulators identified skeletal malformations in fetal rats. EPN raised concerns about gaps in EPA’s health assessment, potential combined exposure to similar chemicals, and whether the pesticide belongs in the PFAS “forever chemical” class. Public-health and environmental groups are now challenging the approval in court.



WHY IT MATTERS

Reducing PFAS releases before contamination spreads and fully evaluating pesticide risks before allowing new uses can protect children more effectively than trying to manage exposure after pollution has already reached water, food, soil or air.



CHILDREN'S HEALTH IS GETTING LESS ATTENTION IN EPA DECISIONS

EPA has long recognized that children can face different and greater risks from pollution, and that those differences should be taken into account when the agency makes decisions.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

Recent actions raise questions about whether children's health is getting the attention it deserves:

- **EPA did not apply its new children's-health policy when it proposed eliminating four PFAS drinking-water protections.** EPA's March 2026 policy says the agency should consistently consider how exposure to pollution early in life can affect health over a lifetime. But in its PFAS proposal, EPA said health risks—including risks that may disproportionately affect children—were outside the scope of its decision. As a result, children's particular vulnerability to PFAS was not part of EPA's analysis of whether to remove those protections.
- **EPA counted the savings from repealing power-plant safeguards without fully counting the health costs.** EPA highlighted the financial savings from repealing most of the 2024 power-plant carbon standards, but did not put a number or dollar value on several health impacts, including asthma symptoms and missed school days.
- **EPA has not appointed members to its independent children's-health advisory committee.** For nearly 30 years, the Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee (CHPAC) has advised EPA on how pollution and toxic chemicals affect children. Its members have included pediatricians, researchers and public health officials. The committee has not met since August 2025, and EPA currently lists no appointed members—leaving the agency without this dedicated source of independent children's-health advice as major decisions on PFAS, mercury and air pollution move forward.

WHY IT MATTERS

If EPA does not fully consider children's risks, count their health impacts or seek dedicated children's-health expertise, important consequences for kids can disappear from the decision-making process.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED FROM EPA

1. Prevent Pollution Before It Reaches Kids & Families – and Hold Polluters Accountable When It Does
Maintain strong safeguards against PFAS, pesticides, soot, mercury, and other harmful pollution, to stop it before it reaches taps, food, farms, neighborhoods and schools.

- Keep the PFAS drinking-water protections it has proposed eliminating.
- Require industries that use and release PFAS to monitor for them and reduce those discharges at the source.
- Establish stronger safeguards against PFAS-contaminated sewage sludge being spread on farmland, rather than leaving farmers and families to deal with contamination after it has already occurred.
- Better protect children from pesticides by accounting for their greater vulnerability, multiple routes of exposure, and the combined effects of pesticides that harm the body in similar ways.

Restore safeguards against harmful air pollution.

- Restore protections that reduce mercury, arsenic, and other toxic power-plant pollution, as well as carbon pollution that drives climate change, worsens air quality and can compound the health harms of other pollutants.
- Implement the stronger 2024 soot standard and move forward with the Clean Air Act process for putting it into effect.

Hold polluters accountable when they break the law.

- Let career EPA enforcement staff pursue violations based on the facts and the law.
- Stand behind the citizen-enforcement provisions Congress put into our pollution laws and oppose efforts to block communities from using them when regulators fail to act.



2. Count Children's Health When Making Decisions

The price of a pollution safeguard is easy to put on a balance sheet. The cost of pollution can be harder to see.

- Fully account for the health and economic costs families bear when evaluating pollution protections, including childhood asthma, missed school and work, developmental harm, disease, and premature death.

3. Prioritize Children and Families' Health Protections Over the AI Data-Center Buildout

Meeting the enormous energy demands of AI and data centers should not mean exposing children and families to more harmful pollution.

- Require a full accounting of the pollution associated with data centers—including their on-site generators and the off-site power needed to run them—before projects are approved.
- Keep meaningful pollution reviews and public participation in place before construction begins.
- Require companies to monitor and publicly report the pollution these facilities produce.

4. Use Independent Science and Children's-Health Experts' Guidance

When it comes to understanding what can harm children, EPA needs to do more to study health impacts and listen to leading independent experts who volunteer their time to help guide EPA decisions.

- Invest in the research and data needed to understand risks to children.
- Restore a functioning CHPAC by appointing qualified independent members and scheduling meetings.
- Seek CHPAC's advice before making major decisions affecting children's exposure to pollution and toxic chemicals.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A child doesn't experience pollution one regulatory program at a time. A child breathes the air outside school. Drinks water at home. Crawls and plays on floors, grass, and soil. Eats food grown on farms.

No parent should have to become a toxicologist to keep their child safe from everyday pollution. That is why safeguards exist.

EPN's May report, *Mothers, Babies, and Children*, documented why children are especially vulnerable to toxic pollution and why families cannot prevent many exposures on their own. The federal actions documented here show that those concerns are growing as safeguards weaken and new pollution pressures emerge.

Children should be protected from pollution before they are exposed to it, not left to bear the health consequences afterward.



About The Environmental Protection Network

The Environmental Protection Network is a nonpartisan organization comprising more than 800 former EPA scientists, toxicologists, chemists, biologists, engineers, and policy analysts — many of whom spent decades as career experts inside the agency. They assessed cancer and developmental risks, studied links between pollution and fertility and chronic disease, investigated contaminated communities, and brought enforcement actions to hold corporate polluters accountable. EPN was founded in 2017 to serve as an independent voice promoting science-based policies that protect families' health.

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