

# **PERC Contamination in Portions of Queens Water Supply**

## **Questions and Answers**

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### **Should I drink my tap water?**

Yes. Though very low levels of PERC have been found in sites throughout the St. Albans, Cambria Heights and Hollis neighborhoods of Queens, health effects from drinking, cooking or bathing in the water would not be expected from using the water for several weeks.

### **Should I use bottled water?**

Based on the testing results, it is not necessary to use bottled water.

### **How might the elevated PERC level affect my health?**

The risk of health effects depends on duration and concentration of exposure – how long you're exposed and how much you're exposed to. Although at high exposure levels PERC could affect the nervous system, and exposure to PERC over very long period of time could increase the risk of cancer, the levels detected here are very low. No health problems would be expected from exposure to the concentrations detected in Queens over a period of weeks.

The highest level of PERC measured in the drinking water was 13 parts per billion (ppb). This exceeds the drinking water standard of 5 ppb. The drinking water standard has a built in protective factor. This means that if the level of PERC is slightly higher than the standard once in a while, there shouldn't be any health effects. Based on the results of the water testing and the fact that PERC was not found in the water when it was tested one month ago, we do not expect any health effects from drinking the water.

### **What caused my drinking water to be contaminated with PERC?**

Until DEP identifies the precise source of PERC contamination, we will be unable to tell exactly what caused the contamination. Based on extensive sampling data, DEP believes that the contamination was most likely caused by a dry cleaning or auto body repair business with faulty plumbing that allowed waste chemicals to enter the City's water system. DEP inspectors are visiting local businesses to ensure their water and sewer connections meet all necessary standards. We will provide residents with daily updates on the situation.

### **What is PERC?**

PERC, also known as tetrachloroethylene, PERChloroethene or PCE, is a chemical used mainly for dry cleaning, metal degreasing and manufacturing. It is a colorless liquid at room temperature that easily evaporates into the air. PERC has a sharp, somewhat sweet odor that many people associate with dry cleaning. The odor is detectable at low

concentrations but after a short period of time the smell becomes less noticeable, so odor is not a reliable warning signal.

### **Where is PERC used?**

PERC is widely used to dry clean clothing and for metal degreasing in auto repair shops and other businesses. It's also used in some manufacturing and is present in some consumer products such as spot removers, adhesives, and cleaners.

### **When was the contamination first discovered?**

The contamination was initially discovered on Friday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, after routine water samples taken on May 1<sup>st</sup> were analyzed by scientists in DEP's laboratories. After detecting PERC levels slightly above USEPA's standards, DEP performed follow-up sampling on Sunday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, and results received on Monday, May 7<sup>th</sup> confirmed the presence of PERC at a location near sections of the St. Albans, Hollis and Cambria Heights sections of Queens.

### **How is DEP reaching out to the community to inform them of this matter?**

DEP is conducting extensive community outreach in conjunction with our operations in Queens. We have sent inspectors to local businesses, distributed flyers to local residents, worked closely with elected officials and established a temporary resource center in the contaminated area on Springfield Boulevard between 110<sup>th</sup> and 112<sup>th</sup> Avenues. We are working as efficiently as possible to ensure that this problem is resolved .

### **What areas of Queens currently have contaminated water?**

Though DEP can not be sure exactly which areas are affected, there have been some positive samples taken in an area bound by Hempstead to Jamaica Avenue on the north, on the east by the Cross Island Parkway, to the south by Linden Boulevard and to the west by Farmer's Boulevard, there is contaminated water. This geographic area is home to approximately 60,000 people, though the number of people whose water has any PERC in it is probably lower.

Extensive sampling has shown that there is no contamination outside of these areas. This problem is not systemic, but localized within sections of St. Albans, Hollis and Cambria Heights in Queens.

### **How long might I have been exposed to PERC without knowing?**

DEP performs regular, monthly tests for PERC throughout the City. An April 3<sup>rd</sup> sample at the site where PERC is currently being detected showed no PERC in the water, which means residents have been exposed for a very brief period of time and should experience no adverse health impacts as a result.

## **Have there been past PERC contaminations in New York City?**

This is the first recorded PERC contamination of New York City's surface water distribution system. Because this is so rare, it indicates that the contamination was most likely caused by faulty water/sewer connections at a local business.

## **What levels of PERC has DEP detected in the contaminated areas?**

USEPA's maximum contaminant limit (MCL) for PERC is 5 ppb, however this number includes a significant cushion and is designed so that, even if it is exceeded, water will still not have any negative impacts on human health.

DEP has detected PERC levels as high as 13 ppb in the contaminated areas, however most sampling is producing results much lower than this, and the overall average for all samples is 3.7 ppb.

## **How often does DEP test the City's water?**

DEP performs extensive daily sampling of the water at hundreds of sites throughout all 5 boroughs to test for potential water contaminants, resulting in approximately 1,200 samples each month. In addition to this comprehensive sampling, DEP tests 27 sites throughout the City on a monthly basis for organic chemicals such as PERC specifically. Of these 27 sites, 2 are within the potentially contaminated area, though only one has shown slightly elevated levels of PERC. DEP has taken 74 samples in the effected, of which 49 detected PERC and 30 were above the MCL.

## **How does DEP test the samples?**

DEP performs its own testing and sampling. Our laboratories are certified according to both New York State and Federal standards. Federal standards are based on New York State standards because they are so thorough and rigorous.

## **What is DEP doing to correct the problem and decontaminate the water?**

DEP is engaged in multiple, different efforts to trace, identify and resolve the PERC contamination. DEP is performing heightened sampling to better define the area in which contamination is occurring. Inspectors are visiting all relevant local businesses to inspect water and sewer connections in order to locate faulty systems and identify a source, and DEP is flushing fire hydrants in the affected areas in order to remove the contamination from the water system. While we cannot be sure how long a resolution will take, DEP is devoting all available resources to this problem and will continue to update residents as we learn more.

## **Is it possible that someone contaminated the water supply on purpose?**

DEP cannot say for sure, however preliminary sampling data indicates that this is highly unlikely and that the cause of the contamination is far more likely from dry cleaning or auto body repair businesses that use PERC in their daily operations.

**Where can I get more information?**

DEP has established a temporary resource center on Springfield Boulevard between 110<sup>th</sup> and 112<sup>th</sup> Avenues in order to manage operations in the area and to address the concerns and questions of local residents. Information is also available via DEP's website at [nyc.gov/DEP](http://nyc.gov/DEP) as well as through the City's non-emergency line at 3-1-1.