

Gender Differences in the Effects of PFAS

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), often called "forever chemicals," are harmful substances found in many everyday products¹. They don't break down easily and can build up in our bodies, causing a wide range of health problems. Recent research shows that these effects are not the same for men and women¹. For people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), understanding these differences is especially important because MCS makes individuals more sensitive to environmental toxins like PFAS. This article explains the gender-specific impacts of PFAS, their relevance to MCS, and what we can do to address these issues.



How PFAS Affect Men and Women Differently

Reproductive Health

PFAS exposure can harm reproductive health in both men and women, but in different ways. For men, exposure to PFAS, especially a type called PFOA, has been linked to a higher risk of testicular cancer.¹

For women, PFAS can cause problems like irregular periods, difficulty getting pregnant, and birth defects.¹ Babies exposed to PFAS before birth may also face long-term issues like ADHD or lower IQ.² These effects show how PFAS can harm not just individuals but also future generations.

Cancer and Heart Risks

PFAS may increase the risk of certain cancers and heart problems, and these risks differ by gender.² For example, women with higher levels of PFAS in their blood are more likely to be diagnosed with melanoma (a type of skin cancer), but this link isn't seen in men.² Researchers think this might be because PFAS can mimic estrogen, which could fuel cancer growth in women.²

Women are also more likely to develop high blood pressure from PFAS exposure.² A 2022 study found that middle-aged women with high PFAS levels had a much greater risk of hypertension.² This is especially concerning for women with MCS, who may already struggle with heart-related symptoms.

Other Health Problems

PFAS can also cause other issues that affect women more than men. For example, studies have linked PFAS to weight gain, diabetes, and ADHD in women and girls.² Boys, on the other hand, may face different problems, like weaker bones, if exposed to PFAS and other chemicals.²

Why This Matters for MCS

People with MCS are especially sensitive to chemicals in the environment, including PFAS. The gendered effects of PFAS mean that women with MCS might face even greater risks, especially if PFAS worsens hormonal imbalances or heart problems.



Additionally, the long-term effects of PFAS—like developmental issues in children—are a big concern for someone with MCS who is planning a family or already has children.

What Can We Do?

Here are some steps to address the problem:

1. **More Research:** Scientists need to study how PFAS affect men and women differently. This will help us understand the risks better.
2. **Stronger Rules:** Governments should set stricter limits on PFAS in products and drinking water to protect everyone, especially vulnerable groups like women and people with MCS.
3. **Spread Awareness:** Sharing information about PFAS can help people make safer choices, like avoiding products that contain these chemicals.
4. **Include Women in Decisions:** More women should be involved in making policies about chemicals like PFAS to ensure their unique needs are considered.

Conclusion

PFAS affect men and women in different ways, and these differences matter for people with MCS. By understanding these risks and taking action—like supporting research, pushing for better policies, and raising awareness—we can help protect everyone, especially those most vulnerable, from the harmful effects of "forever chemicals."

References

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