FAQ's

How do I report an environmental health complaint?

To file an environmental health complaint, please contact us at:

Pennsylvania Department of Health
Division of Environmental Health Epidemiology
Room 933, Health and Welfare Building
625 Forster St., Harrisburg, PA 17120
Phone: **717-547-3310**
Fax: **717-346-3286**
Toll free hotline: 1-877 PA Health (724-3258)
Email: RA-DHENVHEALTH@pa.gov
(***If the provided email link doesn't work for you, please copy and paste the email address into the To: field in your email program***)

Complaints can be reported by mail, telephone or electronically via the information provided above.

How does the department handle environmental health complaints?

Environmental health complaints are reported to the Department of Health's (DOH) Bureau of Epidemiology where they are reviewed and investigated. Data is collected and analyzed and a formal response is provided directly to the individual who filed the complaint, regardless of the nature of the complaint. At times, the DOH requests additional information from callers to help with the investigation (e.g., water samples or health records). If environmental sampling data is not available for review, the DOH will work with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to collect data, when indicated and as appropriate. A lack of environmental sampling data may limit the department's ability to conduct a thorough investigation.

While the DOH does not provide primary health care services, it does provide advice based on the nature of the complaint and works closely with the individual who filed the complaint and, if they agree, their health care provider to address their concerns.

Depending on the nature of the complaint, department environmental health staff members work closely with federal, state, county, local officials and the public on a regular basis to address environmental health issues and concerns throughout the commonwealth.

Why is it difficult to find a link between health effects and exposure to environmental factors? How is the conclusion reached?

To determine if someone's health has been affected by the environment, DOH researches their exposure to contaminants in the environment such as

air, water, soil and food chain (biota) to determine if these contaminants are at unsafe levels. Most of the time, either there is no evidence of unusual exposure to contaminants in the environment or the contaminant levels of exposure are not likely to cause any adverse health effects.

DOH conclusions on environmental health effects are based on several factors:

1) Exposures to site specific environmental contaminants
2) The susceptibility of exposed individuals
3) The likelihood and duration of exposures resulting in health effects

How can I find out when and where drilling activities are taking place?

The Department of Environmental Protection is responsible for reviewing drilling applications and ensuring oil and gas activities are conducted in accordance with the law. You can learn more about these efforts at www.dep.state.pa.us by typing in the keywords, "Oil and Gas."

How many complaints related to drilling activities in particular have been filed with the Department of Health?

From 2011 through December 31, 2014, the department has received 76(*) complaints where the individual specifically expressed concerns about the impact of drilling activities on his/her health.

***Please note: This number will be updated every Wednesday at 2 p.m.**

What kinds of complaints have been filed with the Department of Health?

Complaints received by the DOH fall into the following three categories:

- Well water quality/ contamination;
- Air quality/contamination; and
- Physical symptoms.

How do I know whether my environmental health concern should be reported to the DEP or to DOH?

The DEP works to protect the state's air, land and water from pollution and ensure a clean environment. If your complaint involves drinking water or the waterways, air quality issues or potential soil pollution, please contact DEP. Additionally, DEP takes reports of spills, accidents and other releases of hazardous substances and contaminants. Additional information about reporting an environmental incident or making a complaint can be found at the following websites:
http://www.depweb.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/report_an_incident/6010

http://www.depweb.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/report_an_incident/6010/environmental_complaints/618109

The DEP will test the air, water or soil to determine if there is a problem.

Environmental health examines how different environments affect a person's well-being. The health effects of breathing air or drinking water, for example, are researched in specific locations where there may be cause for concern.

If you have a complaint that is specific to your health or the health of a family member or friend, and which may be caused by the air, water or soil, your complaint should be directed to DOH's Bureau of Epidemiology.

What is the Department of Health doing about a health registry?

DOH is currently exploring a number of options including public-private partnerships to accomplish the goals of a registry in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

The department is focused on:

- Solutions that move these ideas forward via public-private partnerships and funding streams, including its work with Geisinger on its Marcellus Shale health outcomes study.
- Continuing its coordination with the Department of Environmental Protection.
- Ensuring follow-up on and investigation of individual complaints using epidemiologically-based analysis.

What is a health registry?

A Population-Based Health Registry (PBHR) observes the health of consenting individuals over a long period of time. The individuals included in a PBHR are people considered at risk (e.g., who live in close proximity to a drilling site or are occupationally exposed). It would also include follow-up over the same time to a consenting group of individuals similar in all aspects, but not living in the areas where there is an environmental exposure of some concern, to serve as control group for comparison of the findings.

What has the DOH done recently to assure citizens that health concerns which may be related to drilling activities are fully investigated?

The DOH is always looking for ways to become more efficient and therefore we continue to develop and implement new ways to improve current processes when applicable.

Secretary of Health Michael Wolf established a department internal working group to determine how processes and communication could be improved. As a result, the DOH has made the following improvements:

- Provided information on how to file an environmental health complaint through various partners throughout the state, including targeted outreach to the medical community, who are often the first to learn of environmental health concerns;
- Enhanced the environmental health section of the department's website with emphasis on accessibility and ease of navigation;
- Instituted a written letter response policy for all environmental health concerns to better track and document correspondence that takes place between the department and those who express concerns; and
- Committed to better coordination and communication with the Department of Environmental Protection when dealing with complaints involving both agencies as well as when complaints need to be transferred from one agency to another.