

# EPA: United States Environmental Protection Agency

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# EPA Issues National Guidance to Address Proper Maintenance, Removal, and Disposal of PCB-Containing Fluorescent Lights

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**WASHINGTON** – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) today released guidance recommending that schools take steps to reduce potential exposures to PCBs from older fluorescent lighting fixtures. The guidance, part of EPA's ongoing efforts to address potential PCB exposures in schools, is based on evidence that the older ballasts contain PCBs that can leak when the ballasts fail, leading to elevated levels of PCBs in the air of schools that should not represent an immediate threat but could pose health concerns if they persist over time.

The guidance document is available online at <http://www.epa.gov/pcb>.

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are man-made chemicals that persist in the environment and were widely used in construction materials and electrical products prior to 1978. PCBs can affect the immune system, reproductive system, nervous system and endocrine system and are potentially cancer causing if they build up in the body over long periods of time.

"As we continue to learn more about the potential risks of PCBs in older buildings, EPA will work closely with schools and local officials to ensure the safety of students and teachers," said EPA Assistant Administrator for Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention Steve Owens. "This guidance on safely addressing the risks from PCB-containing light fixtures is part of EPA's ongoing efforts to protect the health of our children and provide them with safe, healthy learning environments."

Until the late 1970s, PCBs were commonly used as insulators in electrical equipment because they have a high tolerance for heat, do not easily burn, and are non-explosive. EPA banned the processing and distribution in commerce of PCBs in 1979 pursuant to the Toxic Substances Control Act due to their toxic effects. However, uses of older PCB-containing ballasts were allowed to continue, provided that the ballasts had not failed and the PCBs were not leaking.

EPA believes many schools built in the U.S. before 1979 have light ballasts containing PCBs. A recent pilot study of three schools in New York City found that many light ballasts in the schools contained PCBs and had also failed, causing the PCBs to leak and contributing to increased levels in the air that school children breathe. EPA regional offices have also worked with school officials to address leaking PCBs in light ballasts in schools in Oregon, North Dakota, and Massachusetts.

Given their widespread use before they were banned, if a school was built before 1979 or has not had a complete lighting retrofit since 1979, the fluorescent light ballasts probably contain PCBs. Although intact, functioning ballasts do not pose a health threat, these lighting ballasts will all fail in time. For that reason, EPA recommends older PCB-containing lighting ballasts should be removed, whether as part of a previously scheduled lighting retrofit program or a stand-alone project.

Schools that have older ballasts should examine them to see if they have failed or if PCB leaks are present. If a light ballast is leaking PCBs, federal law requires the immediate removal and disposal of the PCB-containing ballasts and disposal of any PCB-contaminated materials at an EPA approved facility.

To prevent exposure if leaking ballasts are discovered, school personnel should wear protective clothing, including chemically resistant gloves, boots, and disposable overalls while surveying the ballasts. Replacement of leaking ballasts should be performed in a well-ventilated area, or supplemental ventilation or respiratory protection should be provided to reduce the potential for breathing in fumes.

While replacing lighting ballasts requires an upfront investment, there are state, federal and private funding programs available to potentially provide funding. In addition, replacing older ballasts with newer lighting fixtures will result in energy savings that will increase energy efficiency in schools and likely pay for itself in less than seven years, depending upon hours of operation and local energy costs.

EPA has also developed information on how to properly handle and dispose of PCB-containing fluorescent light ballasts and properly retrofit lighting fixtures to remove potential PCB hazards.

In September 2009, EPA issued guidance to communities about potential PCB contamination in the caulk of pre-1978 buildings. EPA also announced additional research into the potential for PCBs in caulk to get into the air. Research on that and other issues related to PCB exposures is ongoing.

School districts, building owners and others desiring technical guidance should contact EPA at 1-888-835-5372.

Parents who are concerned their children may be attending a school with PCB-containing ballasts should ask their schools whether they have a plan to address PCBs in their schools.

More information on PCBs: <http://www.epa.gov/pcb>

Information on handling and disposing of PCB-containing light ballasts:  
<http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/hazard/tsd/pcbs/pubs/waste.htm>

PCBs hotline: 1-888-835-5372

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