



## PCBs

**Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)** are mixtures of manmade, chlorinated chemicals. PCBs are usually oily liquids or solids that are colorless to light yellow. PCBs have no smell or taste. In September, 2001, **EPA visited OHSU** to see how we handle PCBs, and we are proud to report that no problems were identified.

PCBs have been used as coolants and lubricants in electrical equipment because they don't burn easily and are good insulators. They also may exist in the hydraulics of older elevators.

The U.S. manufacture of PCBs was stopped in 1977 because of evidence they build up in the environment and can cause adverse health effects. Products made before 1977 that may contain PCBs include older fluorescent light fixtures and electrical devices containing PCB capacitors, hydraulic oils, and microscope immersion oils. The part in light fixtures that contains PCBs is the electric component called the “**ballast.**”

**By aggressive efforts, all electrical, hydraulic, and mechanical equipment at OHSU is PCB-free, except for some older fluorescent light ballasts.** Light fixtures in good repair do not pose any exposure risk. However, those that are found to leak or be stained with an oily, brown to black substance are the ones that need attention.

If you notice one of these “leakers,” or suspect one, don't touch any of the oily or tarry substance. You may see a leaker show itself by the surrounding ceiling tile that it has stained. Contact **Facilities Management at 503-494-8054** to have an electrician replace and clean the fixture. **Repair of these is not considered an emergency.**

Skin exposure to small amounts of PCBs are not likely to develop into any harmful symptoms. The most commonly observed health effects in people exposed to large amounts of PCBs are skin conditions such as acne and rashes. Studies in exposed workers have shown changes in blood and urine that may indicate liver damage. PCBs are known to cause cancer in animals.

Ingestion of PCBs can cause various kinds of health effects, including anemia; acne-like skin conditions; and liver, stomach, and thyroid gland injuries. Other effects of PCBs in animals include changes in the immune system, behavioral alterations, and impaired reproduction. however PCBs are not known to cause birth defects.

**OHSU collects confirmed and suspected PCB-containing light fixtures for recycling and safe disposal.** These are usually discovered during routine light maintenance, and not because a fixture was found leaking. If you have a very old microscope immersion oil that you suspect may contain PCBs, you may call Environmental Health and Radiation Safety at 503-494-7795 for disposal.

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This information is a service of the OHSU Safety Committee (503 494-7795).  
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