

A Public Health Assessment (PHA) is formally defined as:

The evaluation of data and information on the release of hazardous substances into the environment in order to assess any [past], current, or future impact on public health, develop health advisories or other recommendations, and identify studies or actions needed to evaluate and mitigate or prevent human health effects (42 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 90, published in 55 Federal Register 5136, February 13, 1990).

A public health assessment is conducted to determine whether and to what extent people have been, are being, or may be exposed to hazardous substances associated with a hazardous waste site and, if so, whether that exposure is harmful and should be stopped or reduced. The public health assessment process enables ATSDR to prioritize and identify additional steps needed to answer public health questions, and defines follow-up activities needed to protect public health.

A PHA may be prepared to address various exposure situations and/or community health concerns. It may address multiple-chemical, multiple-pathway exposures or it may address a single exposure pathway. Regardless of the focus of the PHA, all of the CERCLA*-required elements must be included in the PHA.

A Health Consultation (HC) is generally prepared to describe the findings of an assessment that focuses on one particular public health question (e.g., a specific exposure pathway, substance, health condition, or technical interpretation). For example: Will community members be harmed by drinking water from private wells around the site? Is a proposed site-specific sampling plan adequate to collect data to use in a public health evaluation? Such assessments often are more time critical, necessitating a more rapid and therefore limited response than assessments that result in a PHA. While some PHCs include a presentation of all the elements required in the PHA (i.e., a comprehensive exposure pathway and health effects evaluation), discussions are often limited to answering the question at hand.

A PHA is generally produced for all NPL sites. For petitioned sites, one may produce either a PHA or a HC depending on site-specific issues and information needs. Sometimes, an assessment of a single issue at a petitioned site may evolve into a more multifaceted assessment that results in a PHA. Regardless of the document prepared, the overall assessment process, as described in this manual, is generally the same.

The Letter Health Consultation (LHC) is designed to meet the needs of the requester by providing a timely and focused response to their public health question. In other words, the LHC will satisfy the same criteria as the standard more detailed HC, but in an abbreviated form and for a more specialized target audience. In fact, because of its short length and because the in-house review and processing time is compressed, most LHCs will only require a 1-week management review timeframe.