

'The Devil We Know:' How DuPont Poisoned the World with Teflon

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[Food Safety](#), [Health Issues](#)

A new Netflix [documentary](#) titled, "[The Devil We Know](#)," tells the story of DuPont's decades-long cover-up of the harm caused by chemicals used to make its popular non-stick Teflon™ products. The film shows how the chemicals used to make Teflon poisoned people and the environment—not just in Parkersburg, West Virginia, where DuPont had a Teflon plant, but all over the world.

It all began in 1945, when DuPont, renamed DowDuPont following its 2017 [merger](#) with Dow Chemical, began manufacturing Teflon, a product best known for its use in non-stick cookware, but also widely used in a variety of other consumer products, including waterproof clothing and furniture, food packaging, self-cleaning ovens, airplanes and cars.

One of the key ingredients in DuPont's Teflon was C8, a toxic, man-made chemical [created](#) by Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, better known as 3M, to make Scotchgard. The chemical, also known as PFOS or PFOA, is what gave Teflon its non-stick properties.

Both 3M and DuPont were well aware of the health hazards associated with C8. But that didn't stop DuPont from [dumping](#) the toxic chemical into local waterways, where it made its way into public drinking water and subsequently sickened thousands of people, and ultimately killing many of them.

3M and DuPont covered up the health risks of C8

The film features stories from a number of people who were affected by DuPont's Teflon, including DuPont employees, children and adults in the surrounding community, as well as pets, livestock and wildlife.

One of those stories is that of Sue Bailey, a former DuPont employee who gave birth to a son with severe deformities. Her son, William Bailey, aka Bucky, was born with half of a nose, one nostril, a serrated eyelid and a keyhole pupil where his iris and retina were detached.

Sue's work for DuPont required her to come in direct contact with C8. Her job involved working in a large room with huge cylinders filled with C8. The cylinders would bubble over like an out-of-control bubble bath, according to the film. The Teflon production process left behind a discharge of water. It was Sue's job to pump it out back, where it would flow directly into the river.

DuPont tried to blame Sue for her son's birth defects. But she wasn't buying it. On her first day back to work, she heard her co-workers talking about another DuPont employee who had given birth to a baby with deformities very similar to Bucky's.

DuPont [knew](#) exposure to C8 could harm human health and cause birth defects. Both DuPont and 3M had been studying the chemical since the 1960s. One study on the chemical led by 3M, determined that the chemical could potentially cause birth defects in the eyes of rat fetuses.

Studies link Teflon chemical to six human diseases

The film also features Ken Wamsley, a former DuPont employee who worked for the company for 40 years. He said the first time he heard C8 was dangerous was from a supervisor who said it might hurt pregnant women. DuPont sent all the women home, but insisted the men were not at risk.

That turned out to be a bold-faced lie.

Today, we know that exposure to C8 in drinking water is [linked](#) to six different diseases: kidney cancer, testicular cancer, ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, preeclampsia and high cholesterol, according to the film.

Evidence [shows](#) that DuPont knew for decades that exposure to C8 could cause long-term health effects in humans. DuPont started conducting cancer studies in 1988. The company's own studies showed that exposure to C8 killed rats, dogs and monkeys, by causing testicular cancer, liver disease and pancreatic disease.

Teflon chemical is in the blood of 99 percent of Americans

Not only did DuPont continue to manufacture Teflon, but it also continued to dump the chemical into waterways.

In 2001, a class-action lawsuit was [brought](#) against DuPont by residents of the Ohio River Valley who had been exposed to C8 in their drinking water. DuPont agreed to settle the suit, offering the plaintiffs \$343 million.

But in a groundbreaking decision, the plaintiffs refused to take individual payments. Instead, they decided to establish a C8 [Science Panel](#) dedicated to studying the link between C8 in drinking water and human disease.

C8 contamination is so widespread that, according to [this article](#) in the Intercept, 99 percent of Americans have the chemical in their blood. It's also been found in the blood of people from all parts of the world. The main sources of exposure are still somewhat of a mystery. The likely culprits, though, are industrial waste and the consumer products that shed C8 over time.

Under terms of the \$343-million settlement, six water districts could test people's blood and sue DuPont if the Science Panel could prove exposure to C8 caused any harm.

DuPont said it was confident the test results would prove C8 was safe.

In order to overcome the challenge of recruiting enough volunteers to submit their blood for analysis, the panel used some of the funds from the settlement to offer each volunteer \$400.

Through the payout and a massive media effort, the panel got more than 70,000 people to participate. The process took more than seven years. In 2012, the results were in: Exposure to C8 in drinking water caused six different human diseases.

DuPont is still manufacturing Teflon

More than 3,500 cases were filed against DuPont. Soon, the victories started pouring in.

The first [case](#) involved a woman who said exposure to C8 caused her kidney cancer. The jury found DuPont guilty and awarded the plaintiff \$1.6 million.

In 2017, DuPont and Chemours, a company created by DuPont, agreed to [pay](#) \$671 million to settle thousands of lawsuits.

Many lawsuits are still [pending](#) to this day.

DuPont agreed to casually phase out C8 by 2015. But it still makes Teflon. DuPont replaced C8 with a new chemical called Gen-X, which is already turning up in waterways.

Animal studies conducted by DuPont found tumors in rats exposed to Gen-X, according to the film. The tumors are similar to those seen in rats exposed to C8.

Whether Gen-X is just as bad—or even worse—than C8 remains to be seen.

Want to learn more? Click [here](#) to find places where you can watch the film.

Julie Wilson is communications associate for the [Organic Consumers Association](#) (OCA). To keep up with OCA news and alerts, [sign up](#) for our newsletter.

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