

Public health heavily influenced by corporations selling forever chemicals, fossil fuels and ultra-processed foods

May 2 2024, by Nick Chartres and Lisa Bero



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You go to the gym, eat healthy and walk as much as possible. You wash your hands and get vaccinated. You control your health. This is a

common story we tell ourselves. Unfortunately, it's not quite true.

Factors outside our control have huge influence—especially products which can sicken or kill us, made by companies and sold routinely.

For instance, you and your family have been [exposed for decades](#) to dangerous forever chemicals, [some of which](#) are linked to kidney and testicular cancers. You're almost certainly carrying these chemicals, known as PFAS or forever chemicals, in your body [right now](#).

And that's just the start. We now know exposure to just four classes of product—tobacco, alcohol, ultra-processed foods and fossil fuels—are linked to one out of every three deaths worldwide. That is, [they're implicated](#) in 19 of the world's 56 million deaths each year (as of 2019).

Pollution—largely from fossil fuels—is now the single largest environmental cause of [premature death](#). Communities of color and low-income communities experience disproportionate impacts. Over 90% of pollution related deaths occur in low middle income countries.

This means the leading risk factor for disease and death worldwide is corporations who make, market and sell these unhealthy products. Worse, even when these corporations become aware of the harms their products cause, they have often systematically hidden these harms to boost profits at the expense of our health. Major tobacco, oil, food, pharmaceutical and chemical corporations have all applied similar techniques, privatizing the profits and spreading the harms.

Profit and loss statements

When companies act to conceal the harm their products do, they prevent us from protecting ourselves and our children. We now have many well-documented cases of corporate wrongdoing, such as [asbestos](#), [fossil fuels](#)

, [pesticides](#), [herbicides](#) [sugar](#), [silica](#), and of course [tobacco](#). In these instances, corporations intentionally manufactured doubt or hid the harms of their products to delay or prevent regulation and maintain profits.

Decades of empirical evidence shows these effective tactics have actually been shared and strategically passed from one industry or company to the next.

For instance, when large tobacco companies Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds bought food companies Kraft, General Foods and Nabisco in the 1980s, tobacco executives [brought across](#) marketing strategies, flavoring and colorings to expand product lines and engineered fatty, sweet and salty [hyperpalatable foods](#) such as cookies, cereals and frozen foods linked to obesity and diet-related diseases. These foods [activate](#) our reward circuits and encourage us to consume more.

Or consider how 'forever chemicals' became so widespread. A team of scientists (including this article's co-author) investigated previously secret internal industry documents from [3M and DuPont](#), the largest makers of forever chemicals PFOA and PFOS.

The documents showed both 3M and DuPont used tactics from the [tobacco industry's playbook](#), such as suppressing unfavorable research and distorting [public debate](#). Like Big Tobacco, 3M and DuPont had a financial interest in suppressing scientific evidence of the harms of their products, while [publicly declaring](#) in-demand products such as Teflon were safe.

For decades, forever chemicals PFOA and PFOS have been used to make Teflon pans, Scotchgard, firefighting foam and other non-stick materials. By the early 2000s, one of these, PFOS, ended up in our blood at 20 times the level its manufacturer, 3M, [considered safe](#).

As early as 1961, the chief toxicologist at DuPont's Teflon subsidiary reported the company's wonder-material had "the ability to increase the size of the liver of rats at low doses", and recommended the chemicals be handled "with extreme care".

According to a 1970 internal memo, the DuPont-funded Haskell Laboratory found the chemical class C8 (now known as PFOA/PFOS) was "highly toxic when inhaled and moderately toxic when ingested".

Both 3M and DuPont did extensive internal research on the risks their products posed to humans, but they shared little of it. The risks of PFOA including pregnancy-induced hypertension, kidney and testicular cancers, and ulcerative colitis was [not publicly established until 2011](#).

Now, 60 years after DuPont first learned of the harms these products could cause, many countries are facing the human and environmental consequences and a [very expensive](#) cleanup.

Even though the production of PFOA and PFOS is [being phased out](#), forever chemicals are easily stored in the body and take decades to break down. Worse, PFOA and PFOS are just two of [over 15,000](#) different PFAS chemicals, most of which are still in use.

How can we prevent corporate injury to our health?

My co-author and I work in the field known as commercial determinants of health, which is to say, the damage corporations can do to us.

One of the key ways companies have been able to avoid regulation and lawsuits is by hiding the evidence. Internal studies showing harm can be easily hidden. External studies can be influenced, either by corporate funding, business-friendly scientists, legal action or lobbying policymakers to avoid regulation.

Here are three ways to prevent this happening again:

1. Require corporations to adhere to the same standards of data sharing and open science as independent scientists do.

If a corporation wants to bring a new product to market, they should have to register and publicly release every study they plan to conduct on its harms so the public can see the results of the study.

2. Sever the financial links between industry and researchers or policymakers.

Many large corporations will spend money on public studies to try to get favorable outcomes for their own interests. To cut these financial ties means boosting public health research, either through [government funding](#) or alternatives such as a tax on [corporate marketing](#).

It would also mean [capping corporate political donations](#) and bringing lobbying under control by restricting corporate access and spending to policymakers and increasing transparency. And it would mean stopping the [revolving door](#) where government employees or policymakers work for the industry they used to regulate once they leave office.

3. Mandate public transparency of corporate funding to researchers and policymakers.

In 2010, the United States introduced laws to enforce transparency on how much medical and [pharmaceutical companies](#) were spending to influence the products doctors chose to use. Research using the data unearthed by these laws has shown the [problem is pervasive](#). We need

this model for other industries so we can clearly see where corporate money is going. Registries should be detailed, permanent and easy to search.

These steps would not be easy. But the status quo means corporations can keep selling dangerous or lethal products for much longer than they should.

In doing so, they have become one of the largest influences on our health and will continue to harm generations to come—in ways hard to counter with yoga and willpower. And your health is more important than corporate profits.

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Provided by The Conversation

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