

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-763](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

With thousands of chemicals in commercial use in the United States, decision makers rely on toxicity assessment information to examine the risks these substances may pose. Several key federal agencies—including ATSDR, EPA, NIOSH, NTP, and OSHA—as well as state agencies, assess the toxicity of chemicals.

GAO was asked to review chemical toxicity assessment activities. This report (1) describes the chemical toxicity assessment activities selected federal and state agencies undertake; (2) assesses the extent to which these federal agencies' chemical toxicity assessment activities are fragmented, overlapping, or duplicative; and (3) assesses the extent to which these federal and state agencies coordinate their chemical toxicity assessment activities and challenges in doing so. GAO selected five key federal agencies that assess chemicals, and a nonprobability sample of agencies in 10 states that provide a range of assessment activities. GAO reviewed federal agency documentation and compiled summaries of chemical toxicity assessment activities and compared them with one another. GAO interviewed officials from these agencies, representatives from industry, and other stakeholders.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of OSTP encourage the NSTC to support relevant federal agency officials' efforts to address, as appropriate, the agencies' cross-cutting coordination challenges. OSTP did not provide official written comments, but instead provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-14-763](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or [morris@gao.gov](mailto:morris@gao.gov).

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## CHEMICAL ASSESSMENTS

### Agencies Coordinate Activities, but Additional Action Could Enhance Efforts

#### What GAO Found

The federal agencies GAO reviewed—the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the National Toxicology Program (NTP), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—undertake distinct chemical toxicity assessment activities that differ in type and purpose and are driven in part by statutory requirements; the 10 states GAO reviewed largely rely on federal agencies' assessment activities. For example, ATSDR's toxicity assessment activities include evaluating hazards at contaminated sites and NIOSH's activities include identifying potential health risks to workers. Agency officials from all 10 of the selected states told GAO that they have used assessment information produced by these federal agencies in the last 5 years. Officials from 6 of the 10 states told GAO they rely on federal assessments, and the remaining 4 said that they may produce their own assessments in some cases—for example, when a chemical is of interest to the state but is not a national priority.

The chemical toxicity assessment activities at these five federal agencies are fragmented and overlapping, but GAO did not find evidence that these activities are duplicative. Their activities are fragmented because they address the same broad area of national need—providing information on the toxicity of chemicals. The five agencies' activities overlap because some of them have similar goals—such as identifying the extent to which a chemical may cause cancer—or some target similar beneficiaries—such as the general public. GAO did not find evidence of duplication, however, because the agencies did not engage in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries. For example, although both NIOSH and EPA develop chemical toxicity assessment information, NIOSH assesses the potential risks that chemicals pose to working-aged adults in occupational settings, such as over the course of a 40-hour workweek, and EPA assesses risks that chemicals pose to a broader population, including children, typically over the course of an entire lifetime.

Officials from all five federal agencies and 3 of the 10 states told GAO that they have coordinated their chemical toxicity assessment activities and also identified challenges. For example, some agency officials identified constraints on sharing confidential business information because of legal restrictions on dissemination of such information across agencies. The Office of Science and Technology Policy's (OSTP) National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) coordinates science and technology policies across the federal government. All executive department and agencies, whether or not they are represented on the NSTC, are to coordinate science and technology policy through it. Given that NSTC has previously facilitated federal coordination on cross-cutting topics, such as nanotechnology and pharmaceuticals in the environment, and given its purpose, an official from OSTP stated that NSTC could serve an interagency coordinating function to address certain cross-cutting challenges. By having an interagency body to address these, and any future cross-cutting challenges, the five selected federal agencies would be positioned to better coordinate their assessment activities in the most effective and efficient manner.