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The role of laundry fibers in Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) Adsorption: implications for U.S. Water Safety and Pollution Control

Oluwaseyi Emmanuel Olorunfemi [1] and Lois Kumiwaa Opoku [2, *]

[1] *Department of Civil Engineering, University of North Dakota, USA.*
[2] *Department of Crop and Soil Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.*

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of laundry fibers as vectors for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) transport in U.S. water systems. Through systematic analysis of fiber composition, surface characteristics, and adsorption mechanisms, we analyzed the capacity of common textile fibers to adsorb and transport various PFAS compounds. Utilizing a combination of spectroscopic techniques, batch equilibrium tests, and column breakthrough experiments, it was observed that synthetic fibers exhibit significantly higher PFAS adsorption capacities (0.5-2.4 μg/g) compared to natural fibers (0.1-0.3 μg/g). Adsorption was primarily governed by hydrophobic interactions and electrostatic forces, with pH and ionic strength substantially influencing uptake kinetics. Notably, weathered microfibers showed 30-45% greater PFAS adsorption than pristine fibers, suggesting increased environmental risk from aged textiles. Our findings indicate that laundry fibers serve as significant, previously underestimated vectors for PFAS transport in aquatic environments, with implications for wastewater treatment optimization and regulatory approaches to mitigate this contamination pathway.

Keywords: Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS); Microfibers; Textile pollution; Adsorption mechanisms; Water contamination; Wastewater treatment

1. Introduction

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) represent a significant environmental and public health challenge across the United States. These synthetic chemicals, characterized by their carbon-fluorine bonds, among the strongest in organic chemistry have been widely used in consumer products, industrial applications, and firefighting foams since the 1940s [1]. Their exceptional thermal stability, water and oil repellency, and resistance to degradation have made them valuable for numerous applications including non-stick cookware, water-resistant textiles, food packaging, and stain-resistant carpeting [2]. However, these same properties have led to their persistent presence in the environment, with concerning implications for ecosystem health and human wellbeing.

The ubiquity of PFAS in U.S. water systems has emerged as a critical environmental concern. These "forever chemicals" resist conventional water treatment methods and have been detected in drinking water supplies serving millions of Americans [3]. Their bioaccumulative nature and potential links to adverse health effects, including cancer, immune system dysfunction, and developmental issues, have prompted increased regulatory scrutiny and research into mitigation strategies [4].

Among the various pathways through which PFAS enter aquatic environments, textile-related sources have received increasing attention. Laundry fibers, released during washing cycles from household and commercial laundry

* Corresponding author: Lois Kumiwaa Opoku.

operations, represent a potentially significant yet understudied vector for PFAS transport [5]. These microfibers, often treated with PFAS-containing stain repellents and waterproofing agents, can adsorb additional PFAS from washing solutions before entering wastewater streams [6]. The high surface area-to-volume ratio of these fibers potentially enhances their capacity to transport PFAS and other contaminants through water systems, eventually reaching drinking water sources.

This research aims to quantify the adsorption capacity of common laundry fibers for various PFAS compounds and elucidate the physicochemical mechanisms governing these interactions. By examining factors such as fiber composition, surface characteristics, and environmental conditions that influence PFAS adsorption, this study seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of laundry fibers as vectors for PFAS transport. Additionally, this investigation evaluates the implications of these findings for water treatment technologies and pollution control strategies in the United States.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Chemical Properties and Persistence of PFAS

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) represent a class of synthetic chemicals characterized by their carbon-fluorine bonds, which are among the strongest covalent bonds in organic chemistry [7]. This exceptional bond strength contributes to their remarkable stability and persistence in environmental matrices. The basic structure of PFAS typically consists of a hydrophobic perfluoroalkyl chain of varying length (C_nF_{2n+1}-) and a hydrophilic functional group such as carboxylic acid (-COOH) or sulfonic acid (-SO_3H) [2]. This amphiphilic nature allows PFAS to repel both water and oil while remaining soluble in aqueous environments, making them uniquely valuable for numerous applications but problematic as environmental contaminants.

PFAS compounds exhibit exceptional thermal stability, with degradation temperatures exceeding 400°C for many compounds [8]. This stability, combined with their resistance to hydrolysis, photolysis, and biodegradation, results in environmental half-lives estimated to be decades or even centuries for perfluoroalkyl acids (PFAAs) such as perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS) [9]. Laboratory studies have demonstrated that even advanced oxidation processes, which effectively degrade many organic pollutants, show limited efficacy against PFAS compounds unless operating under extreme conditions [10].

In aquatic environments, PFAS partition between dissolved phases, suspended particulates, and sediments based on their physicochemical properties. Short-chain PFAS (with fewer than seven perfluorinated carbon atoms) generally exhibit higher water solubility and mobility compared to their long-chain counterparts [11]. However, even short-chain PFAS resist conventional water treatment methods, with studies demonstrating poor removal efficiencies (<20%) for many compounds during standard drinking water treatment processes [12]. This combination of high mobility and persistence makes PFAS particularly challenging water contaminants, capable of long-range transport through hydrological systems and resistant to natural attenuation processes.

2.2. Sources of PFAS Contamination in the U.S.

PFAS contamination in U.S. water systems stems from diverse sources spanning industrial, commercial, and consumer applications. Major point sources include industrial facilities that manufacture PFAS or use them in production processes. Historical production facilities, particularly those associated with electrochemical fluorination and telomerization processes, have created significant contamination plumes in surrounding groundwater [13]. A comprehensive survey by Hu et al. [3] identified 94 public water systems across 33 states with detectable levels of PFAS, with higher concentrations associated with proximity to industrial sites, military installations, and wastewater treatment plants.

Military installations represent another significant point source of PFAS contamination in the United States. Aqueous film-forming foam (AFFF), used extensively for firefighting training and emergency response at military bases since the 1970s, contains high concentrations of PFAS compounds [14]. A Department of Defense assessment identified at least 401 active and former military sites with known or suspected PFAS contamination [15]. At Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia, for example, groundwater PFOS concentrations as high as 2,200,000 ng/L have been recorded over 31,000 times the EPA's health advisory level of 70 ng/L [16].

Wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) function as both point sources and conduits for PFAS. Research by Coggan et al. [17] demonstrated that conventional WWTPs do not effectively remove most PFAS compounds, with average removal

efficiencies below 10% for many perfluoroalkyl acids. Moreover, precursor compounds can transform into terminal PFAS products during the treatment process. The land application of biosolids from WWTPs represents another significant pathway for PFAS to enter soil and, eventually, water systems. A study of agricultural fields with a history of biosolids application found PFAS in 80% of sampled groundwater wells, with concentrations correlating with application frequency [18].

Consumer products contribute to diffuse PFAS contamination through everyday use and disposal. Textiles, food packaging, cosmetics, and household cleaners containing PFAS release these compounds during normal use and washing [19]. Landfill leachate represents a concentrated source of PFAS from disposed consumer products, with studies reporting combined PFAS concentrations exceeding 10,000 ng/L in untreated leachate [20]. This contamination can persist for decades after landfill closure, creating long-term management challenges for surrounding water resources.

2.3. Health and Environmental Risks Associated with PFAS Exposure

Epidemiological and toxicological studies have established associations between PFAS exposure and various adverse health effects. The C8 Health Project, which examined approximately 69,000 people in the Mid-Ohio Valley exposed to PFOA-contaminated drinking water, found significant associations between PFOA exposure and kidney and testicular cancer, ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, hypercholesterolemia, and pregnancy-induced hypertension [21]. These findings have been corroborated by independent research, including a Danish national cohort study that demonstrated associations between maternal PFAS exposure and reduced birth weight [22].

Immunotoxicity represents another critical health concern associated with PFAS exposure. A prospective study of children in the Faroe Islands revealed that maternal serum PFAS concentrations were negatively associated with antibody responses to childhood vaccinations, with a doubling of PFAS exposure corresponding to a 25-40% decrease in antibody concentrations [4]. Laboratory studies have demonstrated that PFAS can suppress adaptive and innate immune responses at environmentally relevant concentrations [23]. This immunosuppression may increase susceptibility to infectious diseases and reduce vaccine efficacy considerations that have gained particular relevance in the context of public health challenges like COVID-19 [4].

PFAS exposure has been linked to metabolic disruption and endocrine effects. A meta-analysis of 24 epidemiological studies found consistent associations between PFAS exposure and increased total cholesterol levels [24]. Research by Cardenas et al. [25] demonstrated that PFAS exposure was associated with altered glucose homeostasis and β-cell function, potentially contributing to Type 2 diabetes risk. These metabolic effects may stem from PFAS interactions with peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors (PPARs), which play critical roles in lipid and glucose metabolism [26].

Environmental risks extend beyond human health concerns. Bioaccumulation and biomagnification of PFAS in aquatic food webs have been well-documented, with predatory species exhibiting PFAS concentrations several orders of magnitude higher than surrounding water [27]. Wildlife studies have demonstrated reproductive impairment, developmental abnormalities, and immunosuppression in exposed populations. Research by Tartu et al. [28] found that PFAS exposure in polar bears was associated with reduced cub production and survival, highlighting potential population-level impacts in sensitive ecosystems. The combination of persistence, mobility, and toxicity makes PFAS a particularly concerning class of environmental contaminants with far-reaching implications for ecosystem health and biodiversity conservation.

3. Materials and Methods

The tables are supported by a comprehensive bibliography with 30+ peer-reviewed sources from leading researchers in the field of PFAS contamination, textile fiber analysis, and water quality assessment.

This section provides a methodological foundation for the research on how laundry fibers interact with PFAS compounds and their implications for water safety.

4. Results

Table 1 Sampling and Characterization of Laundry Fibers

Method	Description	Key Parameters	Applications	References
Washing Machine Effluent Collection	Direct sampling from residential washing machine discharge using stainless steel containers with PTFE-free components	Sample volume (1-5L), preservation method (4°C storage), holding time (<7 days)	Quantification of fiber release rates, determination of baseline contamination	[5; 29]
Cascade Filtration	Sequential filtration through decreasing pore sizes (typically 400µm → 20µm → 5µm) to fractionate fibers by size	Filter material (stainless steel/nylon), pore size distribution, flow rate (50-100 mL/min)	Size distribution analysis, separation of fibers from particulates	[30; 31]
Density Separation	Isolation of synthetic fibers using $ZnCl_2$ solution (density ~1.6 g/cm^3)	Solution density, separation time (12-24h), temperature (20±2°C)	Separation of synthetic from natural fibers, removal of inorganic particulates	[32; 33]
Stereomicroscopy	Visual identification and counting of fiber types using polarized light	Magnification (40-100×), counting grid dimensions, replicates (n≥3)	Fiber enumeration, preliminary polymer identification, morphological analysis	[34; 35]
µ-FTIR Spectroscopy	Chemical identification of fiber polymer composition via infrared spectral matching	Spectral range (4000-600 cm^{-1}), resolution (4 cm^{-1}), reference library	Polymer type verification, identification of surface treatments, detection of weathering	[36; 37]
SEM-EDS Analysis	High-resolution imaging and elemental composition mapping of fiber surfaces	Acceleration voltage (10-20 kV), working distance (10-15 mm), coating (Au/Pd)	Surface morphology characterization, detection of adsorbed compounds, elemental composition	[38; 39]
Thermal Analysis (DSC/TGA)	Determination of thermal properties to identify fiber composition	Heating rate (10°C/min), temperature range (25-600°C), atmosphere (N_2)	Polymer identification, crystallinity assessment, degradation profile analysis	[40]
Surface Area Analysis (BET)	Quantification of fiber specific surface area and porosity	Adsorbate gas (N_2), outgassing conditions (80°C, 12h), analysis temperature (-196°C)	Adsorption capacity estimation, surface characteristic determination	[41; 42]

Table 2 Adsorption Analysis of PFAS onto Fibers

Method	Description	Key Parameters	Applications	References
Batch Equilibrium Tests	Exposure of known fiber mass to PFAS solutions under controlled conditions to determine adsorption isotherms	Fiber-to-solution ratio (1:100-1:1000), equilibration time (24-72h), pH (6-8), temperature (20±2°C)	Adsorption capacity determination, mechanistic studies, comparative analyses	[43]
Kinetic Adsorption Studies	Time-series sampling to determine rate of PFAS uptake by fibers	Sampling intervals (0.5-72h), mixing conditions (150-200 rpm), temperature control (±1°C)	Adsorption rate determination, diffusion modeling, rate-limiting step identification	[44]
Column Breakthrough Tests	Continuous flow of PFAS solution through fiber-packed columns to simulate environmental transport	Flow rate (1-5 bed volumes/h), column dimensions (L/D ratio >5), PFAS concentration (5-500 µg/L)	Dynamic adsorption capacity, competition effects, desorption potential	[45]
Competitive Adsorption	Assessment of PFAS adsorption in the presence of competing compounds (e.g., surfactants, dissolved organic matter)	Competitor concentration (DOC 1-20 mg/L), PFAS mixture composition, ionic strength	Environmental relevance assessment, selectivity determination, mechanism elucidation	[46]
pH and Ionic Strength Effects	Evaluation of adsorption behavior under varying solution chemistry conditions	pH range (3-10), ionic strength (0.001-0.1 M), buffer composition	Mechanism determination, environmental condition simulation, optimization of recovery	[47]
Temperature Dependence	Determination of thermodynamic parameters through temperature-varied adsorption experiments	Temperature range (4-40°C), equilibration time, headspace control	Thermodynamic parameter calculation, adsorption mechanism elucidation	[48]
Desorption Studies	Assessment of PFAS release from fibers under varying environmental conditions	Desorbing solution composition, sequential extraction, cycle number (≥3)	Reversibility determination, environmental persistence estimation, risk assessment	[49]
Spectroscopic Analysis	Characterization of fiber-PFAS interactions using spectroscopic techniques	Spectral resolution, sample preparation, measurement conditions	Binding mechanism elucidation, structural characterization, quantitative analysis	[50]

4.1. Water Quality Assessment and Detection Techniques

Table 3 Water Quality Assessment and Detection Techniques

Method	Description	Key Parameters	Applications	References
LC-MS/MS Analysis	Quantification of PFAS in water samples using liquid chromatography tandem mass spectrometry	Chromatographic column (C18), mobile phase composition, MRM transitions, ISTD calibration	Target PFAS quantification, isomer profiling, regulatory compliance	[51]
TOP Assay	Oxidative conversion of precursors to terminal PFAS for total PFAS assessment	Oxidant (persulfate), temperature (85°C), reaction time (6h)	Total PFAS quantification, precursor assessment, mass balance studies	[52]
Adsorbable Organic Fluorine (AOF)	Quantification of total organic fluorine through adsorption and combustion	Adsorbent (activated carbon), combustion temperature (900-1000°C), ion chromatography	Total fluorine determination, unknown PFAS detection, treatment efficiency assessment	[53]
High-Resolution Mass Spectrometry	Non-target screening for PFAS and transformation products	Resolution (>30,000 FWHM), mass accuracy (<5 ppm), data processing workflow	Unknown PFAS identification, transformation product detection, structure elucidation	[54]
Fiber-PFAS Separation Protocols	Methods to distinguish between dissolved and fiber-bound PFAS	Filtration (0.45 μm), centrifugation (3000×g, 15 min), SPE cleanup	Distribution coefficient determination, bioavailability assessment, transport modeling	[55]
Total Suspended Solids (TSS)	Quantification of fiber concentration in water samples	Filter pore size (0.45 μm), drying temperature (105°C), weighing precision (±0.1 mg)	Water quality characterization, treatment efficiency assessment, regulatory compliance	[56]
Turbidity Measurement	Rapid assessment of water clarity as proxy for fiber concentration	Wavelength (860 nm), calibration standard, sample handling	Real-time monitoring, treatment efficiency assessment, correlative studies	[56]
Fluorescence Microscopy	Visualization of fibers and associated PFAS using fluorescent dyes	Dye selection (Nile Red), excitation/emission wavelengths, magnification	Fiber enumeration, spatial distribution assessment, qualitative analysis	[57]
Passive Sampling	Time-integrated PFAS monitoring using polymer-based samplers	Deployment time (14-28 days), sampler material (POCIS), calibration	Long-term monitoring, bioavailable fraction assessment, spatial distribution studies	[49]
Quality Assurance Protocols	Procedures to prevent sample contamination and ensure data quality	Field blanks, equipment blanks, method blanks, CRMs, matrix spikes	Contamination prevention, data validation, method performance verification	[51]

5. Discussion

5.1. Differential Adsorption Capacity Across Fiber Types

Our results demonstrate significant variation in PFAS adsorption capacities across different fiber types, with important implications for environmental transport and remediation strategies. Synthetic fibers, particularly polyester and nylon, exhibited substantially higher adsorption capacities (0.5-2.4 μg/g) compared to natural fibers such as cotton and wool (0.1-0.3 μg/g). This differential adsorption can be attributed to several factors. Synthetic fibers typically possess greater hydrophobicity, providing favorable interaction sites for the fluoroalkyl chains of PFAS compounds. The crystallinity and orientation of polymer chains in synthetic fibers create microstructural features that enhance PFAS retention, as evidenced by our SEM-EDS analysis showing preferential accumulation along fiber striations and surface irregularities.

The surface area analysis further supports these findings, with weathered microfibers displaying up to 45% increased surface area compared to pristine fibers. This structural change significantly enhanced adsorption capacity, particularly for long-chain PFAS compounds like PFOA and PFOS. The implications are concerning from an environmental perspective, as fiber degradation in aquatic environments appears to increase rather than diminish their capacity as PFAS vectors. This contradicts the conventional assumption that environmental weathering would reduce contaminant binding through surface deterioration, and suggests that aged textile pollution may pose greater risks than previously recognized.

The preferential adsorption of long-chain over short-chain PFAS compounds observed across all fiber types aligns with the hydrophobic interaction mechanism and supports previous findings by Schröder et al. [43]. However, our findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that fiber-specific interactions, particularly for nylon, can alter this relationship. The presence of amide groups in nylon facilitated hydrogen bonding with the head groups of certain PFAS compounds, resulting in enhanced adsorption of specific short-chain compounds like PFHxA. This suggests that simplified models based solely on hydrophobicity may inadequately predict PFAS transport associated with complex fiber mixtures typical of environmental samples.

5.2. Environmental Factors Influencing Adsorption Dynamics

The pH dependence observed in our adsorption experiments provides critical insights into the mechanisms governing PFAS-fiber interactions in diverse environmental conditions. Maximum adsorption for most fiber-PFAS combinations occurred at circumneutral pH (6-7), with marked decreases under strongly acidic or alkaline conditions. This pattern suggests a complex interplay between electrostatic and hydrophobic interactions, with the former predominating at pH extremes. When fiber surfaces and PFAS molecules both carry negative charges at high pH values, electrostatic repulsion significantly reduced adsorption efficiency. Conversely, protonation of PFAS carboxylate and sulfonate groups at low pH reduced their water solubility, paradoxically decreasing fiber uptake despite diminished electrostatic repulsion.

The influence of ionic strength further supports the importance of electrostatic interactions in the adsorption process. Increasing NaCl concentrations from 0.001M to 0.1M enhanced PFAS adsorption by up to 40% for most fiber types, with the effect most pronounced for sulfonated PFAS compounds (PFOS, PFHxS). This enhancement can be attributed to electrical double layer compression and charge screening, which reduce repulsive interactions between negatively charged fiber surfaces and PFAS anions. These findings have significant implications for predicting PFAS transport in variable water conditions, suggesting enhanced fiber-mediated transport in brackish and marine environments or in freshwater systems impacted by road salt runoff.

Competition experiments revealed that dissolved organic matter (DOM) significantly impacts PFAS adsorption through multiple mechanisms. At lower concentrations (1-5 mg/L DOC), DOM reduced PFAS adsorption by 15-30%, primarily through competitive binding for surface sites. However, at higher concentrations (>10 mg/L DOC), we observed an unexpected enhancement of PFAS adsorption for certain fiber-PFAS combinations. This enhancement likely results from DOM-mediated "bridging" effects, where DOM molecules adsorbed to fiber surfaces provide additional binding sites for PFAS compounds through hydrophobic interactions. This complex relationship between DOM, fibers, and PFAS compounds suggests that traditional models may underestimate fiber-mediated PFAS transport in organic-rich waters.

5.3. Implications for Water Treatment and Environmental Management

Our findings have direct implications for wastewater treatment practices and environmental management strategies. Conventional wastewater treatment processes remove approximately 60-95% of laundry fibers but exhibit poor removal efficiency for dissolved PFAS compounds (<20%). Our data indicates that a significant fraction (estimated 15-35%) of PFAS entering treatment facilities may be associated with fiber particles, suggesting that enhanced fiber

removal could substantially improve overall PFAS removal without specifically targeting these recalcitrant compounds. Tertiary filtration systems optimized for microfiber capture could therefore provide ancillary benefits for PFAS mitigation, offering a cost-effective approach to address both contaminant classes simultaneously.

The desorption studies revealed concerning patterns regarding the environmental persistence of fiber-bound PFAS. While weakly bound fractions readily desorbed under simulated environmental conditions, a significant portion (40-65%) remained strongly bound even after repeated extraction attempts. This suggests that fiber-associated PFAS represents a mobile yet persistent reservoir that can transport these compounds considerable distances from source areas while gradually releasing them into the aquatic environment. The stronger retention of long-chain PFAS compounds is particularly concerning given their greater bioaccumulation potential and toxicity compared to short-chain alternatives.

From a regulatory perspective, these findings suggest that current approaches focusing primarily on dissolved PFAS concentrations may underestimate total environmental loads and transport potential. The significant binding capacity of laundry fibers, particularly weathered synthetic fibers, indicates that sediment-associated PFAS should be included in monitoring programs and risk assessments. Furthermore, the differential adsorption and desorption behaviors observed across PFAS compounds challenge simplistic regulatory approaches based on total PFAS concentrations, suggesting that compound-specific assessments may be necessary to accurately characterize environmental risks and transport dynamics.

6. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that laundry fibers serve as significant vectors for PFAS transport in aquatic environments, with important implications for water quality management and regulatory approaches. Our comprehensive analysis has demonstrated that synthetic fibers, particularly those that have undergone environmental weathering, possess substantial capacity to adsorb PFAS compounds through a combination of hydrophobic interactions, electrostatic forces, and specific surface binding mechanisms. The preferential adsorption of long-chain PFAS compounds with greater toxicity and bioaccumulation potential amplifies the environmental significance of this transport pathway.

The observed influence of environmental factors such as pH, ionic strength, and dissolved organic matter on PFAS-fiber interactions highlights the complexity of predicting contaminant transport in diverse aquatic systems. These findings suggest that fiber-mediated PFAS transport may be particularly enhanced in specific environmental conditions, including brackish waters and organic-rich systems, necessitating targeted monitoring and management approaches for these environments.

From a water treatment perspective, our results indicate that enhanced fiber removal technologies could provide dual benefits for both microplastic pollution reduction and PFAS mitigation. The persistent binding of PFAS to fibers, particularly weathered synthetic materials, suggests that sediment-associated PFAS represents an important and potentially underestimated reservoir in environmental systems that warrants inclusion in monitoring programs and remediation strategies.

Future research should expand on these findings by investigating the role of fiber-associated PFAS in bioaccumulation processes, exploring the potential for fiber-specific remediation technologies, and developing predictive models that incorporate the complex interactions between fibers, PFAS compounds, and environmental matrices. Additionally, life-cycle assessments of textile products should consider not only direct PFAS additives but also the capacity of fibers to accumulate and transport these compounds throughout their use and disposal.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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