

# Phosphate Overview

## Effect of phosphate

Excess phosphate can lead to algae growth and poor water quality. Algae prevent light from reaching through the water and use up oxygen (eutrophication), causing a decline in the health of the water environment. *Please note that normal levels of phosphorus are essential to plant growth.*

## Sources of phosphate

The phosphate entering rivers comes from many sources, but mainly from sewage treatment plant effluents, faulty drain fields, and agriculture.

## Agriculture

Phosphate can come from animal manures or fertilizers washing off fields into rivers.

## Detergents in sewage

Phosphate is added to laundry detergents to soften the water and to hold dirt in the wash water. The usual alternative to phosphate is a naturally occurring material called **zeolite**, which is environmentally friendly and does not contribute to nutrient pollution.

## Stream Runoff

Soil erosion is a major contributor of phosphorus to streams. Bank erosion occurring during floods can transport a lot of phosphorus from the river banks and adjacent land into a stream.

## How to help

- **Use less detergent.** The amount of detergent you need to use depends on the hardness of the water in your area and how dirty your laundry is. Even if you do use detergents with phosphate in them, you can still help the environment by using the minimum amount recommended on the pack - and of course still get good results.
- **Choose environmentally friendly brands with no phosphate at all.** They're out there on the shelves if you look for them. Watch out for the word PHOSPHATE on the side of each packet. Aim for less than 5% if you can. Phosphate is sometimes called sodium tripolyphosphate (STPP).
- **Try to buy liquids or powders instead of tablets.** Laundry liquids tend to contain less phosphate, laundry tablets tend to contain the most phosphate.
- Wait until you have a **full load before using a washing machine.**
- Ensure that your **private sewage treatment plant is well maintained and working effectively.**