

Plastics and Health

Geneva Beat Plastic Pollution Dialogues

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HEALTH IMPACTS OF PLASTICS

Plastics are omnipresent in our daily lives, and they pose a threat to our health. Scientific estimates revealed that we ingest as much as 5,5 grams of **microplastics** every week [1]. Once in our bodies, these small particles can harm our health. They also act as vessels for **pathogens** to enter our system, increasing the spread of diseases [2]. Additional health risks arise from the **endocrine-disrupting chemicals** (EDCs) added in plastics. EDCs - such as bisphenol A, phthalates, and perfluorinated compounds - affect the reproductive, neural and immune systems, and increase risks of cancer, diabetes, and other health conditions [3].

Health impacts are present all along the life cycle, from manufacturing to the release of toxicants when burning waste or the leaching of chemicals during recycling processes [4]. Therefore, it is critical to frame **plastics as a global health issue**. This summary presents efforts in that direction and steps for further action.

CURRENT EFFORTS AND GAPS

The **World Health Organization** (WHO) acknowledges that stopping pollution, including plastic pollution, is a priority for a healthy recovery [5]. WHO published a report on microplastics in drinking-water [6] and is currently preparing a wider report on the health impacts of microplastics. At the **UN Environment Programme** (UNEP), recent efforts include the New Plastic Economy global commitment [7] and the Implementation Plan Toward a Pollution-Free Planet [8]. Progress has also been made through **multilateral environmental agreements** (MEAs), as the Basel Convention now

regulates the trade of plastic waste and the Stockholm Convention regulates several harmful additives [9].

While the scientific community pursues research on the health impacts of plastics, the **Plastic Health Coalition** has been formed to encourage, enhance and disseminate their findings [10]. Various initiatives from Member States, the private sector and civil society have also emerged to address plastic waste at the global, regional and national level.

NEXT STEPS

Framing the plastic crisis as a global health problem and addressing impacts throughout the plastics life cycle is essential in order to reduce health risks. Recommended actions include:

- ▶ Support **research** on the exposure and health impacts of plastics
- ▶ Disseminate information and **communicate** effectively on plastics and health
- ▶ Harness existing **global frameworks** to ban hazardous chemicals in plastics
- ▶ Develop **regional and national** processes (eg. taxes, extended producer responsibility)
- ▶ Foster **toxic-free circularity** by excluding harmful chemicals at an early stage of the value chain
- ▶ Set **labelling** requirements to inform customers
- ▶ Dramatically **reduce** the production of new plastics
- ▶ Comprehensively address the impacts of plastic pollution on human health and the environment by enhancing collaboration with the **biodiversity** cluster