



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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TOXIC CHEMICAL EXPOSURES THROUGHOUT THE PLASTIC LIFE CYCLE Urgent Global Action Needed: UNEP Report

Reduce plastic production and address chemicals in plastics globally to protect human health and the environment, recommends a new UN report released last week. Chemicals released throughout the life cycle of plastics pose serious health and environmental threats, says “Chemicals in Plastics: A Technical Report”.

About 22 million tonnes of plastics and chemicals from these plastics are released globally to the environment every year, the report says, citing a 2022 OECD report. Most chemicals used or found in plastics can migrate or leach out over time. The chemicals released from plastics during production, use, and waste disposal can contaminate air, water, soils, and food chains, with consequent risks to human health.

The report identified 10 groups of chemicals as being of major concern due to their high toxicity, as well as their potential to migrate or be released from plastics. The chemicals include specific flame retardants, certain UV stabilisers, PFAS, phthalates, bisphenols, biocides, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and a range of non-intentionally added substances.

“Chemicals [from plastics] have been found to be associated with a wide range of acute, chronic, or multi-generational toxic effects, including specific target organ toxicity, various types of cancer, genetic mutations, reproductive toxicity, developmental toxicity, endocrine disruption and ecotoxicity.

“Without the implementation of globally coordinated measures, the increasing production of plastics and associated chemicals will result in increasing pollution levels and associated environmental, social, and economic costs,” the report says.

Developed by the UNEP in cooperation with the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, the report explores in detail the invisible health threats posed by the over 13,000 chemicals associated with plastics and the need for global chemical controls and approaches that promote reducing plastic production.

It cautions that:

1. Plastics carry toxic chemicals. Because plastics travel the globe, toxic chemicals from plastics are found in every corner of the planet, demonstrating the need for global chemical and plastic controls. Ocean currents transport plastics containing an estimated 1,900 to 7,400 tonnes of hazardous chemical additives (and additional chemicals that adsorb to plastics) to the Arctic every year, with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic experiencing especially high chemical exposures through the consumption of contaminated traditional foods.

2. Plastic waste creates chemical contamination. Most plastic wastes and their associated chemicals are disposed to landfills or dumpsites or leak directly into the environment, largely in developing countries. Chemicals from waste plastics are released from landfills and dumps, contaminating groundwater, soil, and food chains in surrounding environments. Some toxic chemicals common in plastics have been detected at high concentrations in closed landfills even 50 years after closure.
3. Plastic recycling recycles toxic chemicals & creates new chemical hazards. Chemicals used in plastic products can contaminate recycled plastics. Numerous studies have found toxic chemicals, including some globally or nationally banned substances, in recycled plastic toys and other products. Chemical recycling and other recycling technologies can produce high amounts of hazardous wastes that lead to additional disposal complications.

Transparency on chemicals in plastics is crucial. There must be publicly available information on how plastic-associated chemicals are synthesised, how they are integrated into plastics, and at what levels they end up in plastic materials, the report says.

It suggests policy approaches for addressing chemicals of concern, through regulatory phase-outs (especially of the most problematic chemicals, including POPs listed for global elimination and control) and reductions in the use of chemicals identified by the SAICM global policy framework to promote chemical safety.

It recommends that developing countries develop national regulations in coordination with global rules and other needs around chemicals in plastics and plastic waste.

The report has immediate significance for the upcoming Global Plastics Treaty negotiations in Paris later this month. As acknowledged in the report, limiting plastic production will be a more effective solution to the plastics crisis.

The Consumers' Association of Penang calls on the Malaysian government to heed the recommendation, among others, to reduce plastic production and consumption, starting with non-essential plastics. We need to prevent false solutions to the plastics crisis and instead promote the design and manufacture of toxics-free materials.

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Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP)

Reference: <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/chemicals-plastics-technical-report>