With ambitious leaders the EU can protect us from harmful chemicals

As the 2024 European elections draw near, the stakes are high for the future of our health and the environment. We and our families are constantly exposed to a cocktail of chemicals in our daily lives – from cosmetics and clothes to food packaging and furniture in our homes and offices. Scientists are raising the alarm about the health impacts that this exposure is linked to, including fertility problems, increased incidences of hormonal cancers, and impacts on children’s brain development.

Over recent years, the European Union has played a critical role in introducing and bolstering protections for EU citizens and nature from harmful chemicals. While a lot of progress has been made, we continue to be exposed to hazardous chemicals. The next European Parliament can introduce measures that further protect us, our families, and nature, provided ambitious people are in place.

Action on bisphenols, including the notorious BPA

Bisphenols, such as bisphenol A (BPA), are a group of chemicals widely used in the production of plastics, including plastic food packaging. Many of us are exposed to these chemicals through food and drinks that have been in contact with materials that contain bisphenols. Some bisphenols are known to disrupt the body’s hormone system. For example, exposure to BPA has been linked to hormonal cancers, heart disease, reproductive issues, obesity, and negative impacts on brain development in children. BPA is the most well-known and commonly used bisphenol, and one of the most widely used synthetic chemicals on the planet.

Over the past decade or so, the EU has taken a range of actions to protect people, particularly children, from certain bisphenols. In 2011, the EU banned BPA in baby bottles, and a law prohibiting BPA in thermal paper came into force in 2020. Thermal paper is used for receipts, and research demonstrated that after handling these receipts, people could absorb BPA through their skin, where it could enter their bloodstream. This was particularly concerning for people who regularly handle receipts, such as cashiers, especially if they were pregnant.
In the case of the recently finalised Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, Members of the European Parliament pushed for even more action on bisphenols. In late 2023, the Environment Committee of the European Parliament supported an amendment to the draft regulation to ban the use of BPA in food packaging. However, this ban did not make it into the final law following negotiations with the EU Council and Commission.

The EU has also committed to restricting BPA and other bisphenols in certain food packaging. Following the re-evaluation of BPA’s toxicity, the European Environment Agency (EEA) concluded that the EU population’s exposure to BPA is well above acceptable health safety levels and poses a potential health risk to millions of people. The EEA highlighted the impact of BPA on people’s reproductive and immune systems in their briefing.

There is concern that alternatives to BPA, such as Bisphenol S, may be similarly harmful. Bisphenols are, therefore, a key group of chemicals to address, and despite the action that has been taken so far, there is still much to do to ensure that we and our families are properly protected from them.

**Addressing the harmful ‘forever chemicals’ - PFAS**

PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a family of over 10,000 chemicals. They are used in many consumer products, such as food packaging, clothing, and cosmetics, for their grease and water-repelling properties. This family of chemicals is concerning for several reasons. Firstly, they are persistent, so once they are in our environment, they hardly break down and will last for generations. This is how they gained their nickname, the ‘forever chemicals’.

Some PFAS are also bioaccumulative and can build up in the bodies of wildlife and people. The most studied chemicals of the group have been linked to a range of adverse health impacts, including thyroid disease, obesity, high cholesterol, reproductive issues and the development of certain cancers. Studies have shown that communities across Europe have been impacted by pollution from PFAS. Scandals in the EU show that PFAS has polluted drinking water – from Italy to Sweden to Belgium – and it is estimated that 12.5 million Europeans live in communities with drinking water polluted with PFAS. Testing has even found PFAS in people’s blood, including in the blood of EU leaders. The estimated health costs of people’s exposure to PFAS in Europe amount to €52-84 billion annually.
The EU has taken action on some PFAS, including restricting a subgroup of the chemicals in various uses, such as food packaging and clothing. The European Parliament has supported further restrictions on more PFAS in consumer products. For example, Members of the European Parliament pushed for these ‘forever chemicals’ to be banned in food packaging under new packaging laws, as well as in children’s toys (see below for more information on the steps the Parliament is pushing for to better protect children.)

However, so far, only a handful of the 10,000 chemicals in the group have been banned globally. If we continue at this rate, banning the known problematic chemicals in the group will take generations.

In the face of this troubling statistic, the EU is bringing forward a restriction on PFAS as a group. This restriction was proposed by authorities in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden in early 2023. This landmark proposal is the first restriction of its kind in the world, and if adopted, would make considerable progress in protecting EU citizens and nature from these ‘forever chemicals’. Our politicians will have an important role in ensuring it protects our health in the face of intense lobbying from the chemical industry.

**World-first system for addressing endocrine-disrupting chemicals**

Endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) interfere with the body’s hormone system. They can cause serious harm to humans and wildlife, including lifelong neurological and reproductive problems. Some EDCs have been linked to hormonal cancers, such as breast cancer. Despite this, EDCs can be found in a range of products we use daily, including cosmetics, electronics, and various plastics, as well as in other uses like pesticides. Some harmful chemicals, including some with endocrine disrupting properties, have been found in certain menstrual products.

The EU has led the world in identifying and controlling EDCs. In 2017, it adopted criteria to identify and control EDCs in pesticides and biocides. These criteria came into force in 2018 and marked a key milestone in the fight to protect people and the wider environment from chemicals that damage the hormone system.

However, these criteria were not suitable to be used across legislation for other sectors. The EU sought to address this, and in 2020 committed to establishing criteria that could be used across sectors under the EU’s Regulation for the Classification, Labelling and Packaging of substances and mixtures (CLP). The CLP law plays a key role in protecting consumers and workers from harmful chemicals, ensuring that chemicals on the EU market are properly classified, labelled, and packaged.

In Spring 2023, it officially updated the CLP law with the newly established criteria for identifying endocrine disruptors and suspected endocrine disruptors for use across...
sectors. This was a world first. These new criteria allow EDCs to be more easily identified and restricted in consumer products, such as in children’s toys and cosmetics.

**Protecting children from harmful chemicals while they play**

Toxic chemicals do not belong in children’s toys, and the EU is taking steps towards making this a reality. In 2020, the European Commission concluded that the Toys Safety Directive does not adequately protect children from the most harmful chemicals in toys, and the European Parliament subsequently asked the European Commission to fix it. The Toys Safety Directive is the legislation that sets out the safety requirements that toys must meet before they can be marketed in the EU.

The European Parliament has continued to push for strong provisions to protect children from harmful chemicals in toys. In Spring 2024, MEPs voted almost unanimously to revise the Directive and supported bans on some of the most harmful chemicals in toys, including endocrine disruptors, PFAS, and bisphenols.

The Parliament also voted to support the use of digital passports for all toys sold in the EU, which would include information on the toy’s safety. This would help parents easily access safety information and warnings on potentially harmful substances in toys.

The revised Toys Safety Directive has not yet been finalised, so the new European Parliament has a crucial role in ensuring these provisions are maintained in the final law, and that children are properly protected while they play.

**The work isn’t done, and the EU elections are a crucial opportunity to steer the EU in an ambitious direction.**

While these examples demonstrate that significant and meaningful progress has been made, more work is desperately needed to ensure that we, our families, and nature are sufficiently protected from harmful chemicals. Fortunately, the EU has the solutions, but ambitious people are required to do this work. The EU elections are a vital opportunity to elect a European Parliament that will steer the EU in an ambitious direction to prioritise tackling harmful chemicals.