

Plastics are poisoning us

The Star Malaysia · 17 May 2023 · 16 · MOHIDEEN ABDUL KADER President Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP)

REDUCE plastic production and address chemicals in plastics globally to protect human health and the environment, recommends a new United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report released earlier this month.



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 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) source. Most chemicals used to make plastics or found in them can leach out into the surroundings over time. The chemicals released from plastics during production, use and disposal can contaminate air, water, soil 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.

“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.

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:

> Plastics carry toxic chemicals.

Because plastics travel the globe, toxic chemicals from plastics are found in every corner of the planet, underlining the need for global chemical and plastics control.

Ocean currents transport plastics containing an estimated 1,900 to 7,400 tonnes of hazardous chemical additives to the Arctic every year, with indigenous peoples there experiencing especially high exposure as they eat contaminated traditional foods.

> Plastic waste creates chemical contamination.

Most plastics waste is disposed of in landfills or dumpsites where their chemicals form a toxic leachate; or the chemicals leak directly into the environment, largely in developing countries. These chemicals contaminate soil, groundwater and food chains in surrounding environments. Some of them have even been detected at high concentrations in landfills that have been closed

for 50 years.

> Plastic recycling merely recycles toxic chemicals and 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 about chemicals in plastics is crucial. There must be publicly available information on how plastics-associated chemicals are synthesised, how they are integrated into plastics, and at what levels they end up in plastic materials, the UNEP report says.

It suggests policy approaches for addressing chemicals of concern through regulatory phaseouts (especially of the most problematic chemicals) and reductions in the use of chemicals identified by the SAICM (Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management) global policy framework to promote chemical safety.

The UNEP report further recommends that developing countries devise national regulations based on global rules around chemicals in plastics and plastic waste.

As acknowledged in the report, limiting plastics production will be the most 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 toxinfree materials.