



Why Europe needs a Health Deal

We had a Green Deal, now Europe needs a Health Deal

A Zero Waste Europe manifesto

For too long in the EU, regulators have sidestepped the issue of dealing with the health impacts of chemical exposure. Our economies are still set up in such a way as to prioritise efficiency and convenience, when we urgently need to strive for a set-up that prioritises sufficiency, wellbeing, and resilience. Many of the products on the shelves of your local supermarket or the textiles from which your clothes are made may contain 'forever chemicals' or 'everywhere chemicals' which have been linked to many ill-health outcomes such as infertility and cancer. That is because protection of consumer health from wide exposure to harmful chemicals has been treated as secondary to the growth of the European economy as a whole.

That could and should all change with the upcoming elections. Member State governments and Members of the European Parliament have the opportunity to lead truly transformative change, responsibly shaping legislation around products and waste to prioritise health outcomes for citizens, instead of sweeping them under the rug. **A Health Deal for Europe can go beyond the Green Deal**, confront hidden dangers in products and ensure a safer, healthier continent.

1. Chemical pollution is a global threat

Chemicals facilitated progress, human development, as well as scientific, technological, and agricultural innovation. However, chemical pollution has crossed a "planetary boundary". Today, pollution is a global crisis. WHO estimates 13.7 million deaths, amounting to 24% of deaths and 23% of disease burdens globally, were attributable to modifiable environmental factors, among which are chemicals, waste and pollution. The World Bank stated: *"For the sake of a truly livable planet, one that supports the health of both people and the environment on which they depend, we must act faster and more decisively on the pollution crisis"*.

2. Europe is miles behind

Europe's high production and consumption levels clearly present significant problems. Although there is no doubt that Europe presents a puzzling array of rules, it still does not sufficiently protect us from hazardous chemicals. Many Europeans became victims of chemical pollution, and our collective exposure poses a health risk to millions of people. Despite the introduction of the EU chemicals legislation 'REACH' in 2006, tens of thousands of industrial chemicals remain on the market, their potential effects on human health and the environment going unchecked.

3. Ambition is lacking

The failure to address some chemical pollution sources are the key reasons for the limited progress towards the EU's zero pollution targets. According to the European Environmental Agency, the coming years up to 2030 will be critical in terms of establishing a regulatory and legislative foundation to reduce long-term chemical risks. What policy makers lack is a thorough understanding of how urgently we need to act. REACH revision faces significant delays, creating further uncertainty.

4. Now is the time to panic

In parallel, we see more and more confirmation that our bodies are dangerously polluted: massive amounts of human biomonitoring data on harmful chemicals detected in the entire EU population show that exposure levels are still too high and public health is insufficiently protected. For many substances, such as BPA, phthalates and PFAS chemicals, action is in fact overdue already.



"Policy makers should panic", Marike Kolossa, Coordinator HBM4EU, at [5th Annual Forum on Endocrine Disruptors](#); [14:49:15].

5. We are poisoned every day

The prevalence of chemical pollutants across multiple facets of our daily life, including in all kinds of consumer products, is damaging human health. Scientists working on developmental biology, endocrinology, epidemiology, toxicology, and environmental and public health, are concerned that public health is insufficiently protected from harmful exposures to food contact chemicals. Online marketplaces play a big role in the sale of products containing hazardous substances including cheap toys and cosmetics – and yet they escape sufficient regulatory scrutiny. Four out of five consumers are worried about the impact of chemicals in the products they purchase on their health.



"I don't feel that European citizens are better protected from chemicals than people elsewhere in the world", Jane Muncke in "[Perils of Plastic Packaging](#)"

6. The most vulnerable at risk

The EU needs to do more to protect vulnerable groups, especially children and women, from harmful chemicals – those groups lack sufficient legislative protection. Current EU risk assessments do not adequately address the cumulative toxicity of these chemicals on children and other susceptible populations. It's crucial to take action as children's exposure to hazardous chemicals starts during pregnancy. Research shows that women are exposed to complex mixtures of environmental chemicals which may contribute to their infertility and to negative health outcomes during pregnancy as well as early and later child health.

7. Rampant plastic pollution

Ten groups of chemicals present in plastic have been identified as posing a significant threat due to their high toxicity and potential to migrate or be released from plastics. The recent report points to endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), chemicals that interfere with healthy hormonal function, as a key threat to human health. These chemicals have been found in various products across different sectors, including toys, packaging, synthetic textiles, furniture, personal care and household products. Microplastics have been found almost everywhere, including in human body, and emerging evidence points to some potentially life-threatening effects from such particles.

8. Profit at the expense of our health

The idea that industry may freely poison citizens and communities is one of the most astonishing but least contested aspects of modern life. It's time to stop accepting our daily poisoning on behalf of corporate profits. In the meantime, these profit-seeking companies are now asking for a European Industrial Deal to complement the Green Deal and forward their own agenda. While we need the industry to deliver the climate solutions Europe needs, decarbonisation cannot come at the expense of further inaction on detoxification.

9. Public health and chemical pollution is overlooked

Exposures to contaminants costs societies due to illnesses, health care bills, and lost wages and productivity for employers. The [cost to the EU of female reproductive disorders and diseases](#) as a result of exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals is estimated at close to €1.5 billion annually. Estimation of burden and disease costs of overall [exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals in the European Union](#) resulted in a median cost of €157 billion. ECHA estimated that [restriction of 4 phthalates in 2020](#) will save approximately 2000 boys each year from impaired fertility in later life and €235 per year. This is only the [tip of the iceberg](#) of something that, in principle, is preventable.

10. Holistic regulations are needed

The EU lacks a comprehensive and harmonised approach to materials' circularity and chemical safety. New laws fail to address chemical safety in consumer products, and end-of-life options don't work for hazardous chemicals. Lawmakers must prioritise safety for all, especially those more susceptible to harm. As outlined in the [EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability](#), the European Commission must prioritise actions such as those planned in the [Restrictions Roadmap](#). Safety of Food Contact Materials (FCMs) and food packaging needs to be urgently revised. We expect to see an ambitious proposal on the [phase-out of PVC](#) and restrictions on other harmful pollutants such as flame retardants and bisphenols.

Now we know the problem, let's work to find a solution

The EU Green Deal has made a point of focussing on carbon and energy, but failed to deliver on its toxic-free environment part. In particular, policy makers lost their "[determination to protect the health of citizens across the EU.](#)" With calls for a European Industrial Deal, now more than ever we need a European Health Deal that refocusses our priorities on protecting the safety and wellbeing of citizens. Let's ensure that the health of our people is not compromised. **We're calling lawmakers to integrate comprehensive chemical restrictions, safety standards, and community wellbeing into sustainability initiatives for a healthier and more resilient future.**



Author Dorota Napierska states: "From the recognised impact of chemicals on our health we know that we cannot simply keep polluting and clean up later. Later is simply too late"

For more good practices, check [Zero Waste Europe](#).

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Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, experts, and change agents working towards the prevention and elimination of waste in our society. We advocate for sustainable systems; for the redesign of our relationship with resources; and for a global shift towards environmental justice, accelerating a just transition towards zero waste for the benefit of people and the planet.



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