



For Immediate Release: Tuesday, March 3rd (8:00 A.M. ET)

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Report Finds Plastics and Food Packaging Pose Global Health Threat, Nearly 200 Groups Call for Urgent Action
Advocates call for policymakers to protect health by phasing out toxic chemicals and mandating safe, reusable alternatives

(CA) Today, **nearly 200 environmental and public health organizations** released an urgent [Call to Action](#) in response to a [peer-reviewed consensus](#) statement signed by **33 world-renowned scientists**. It warns that **chemicals used in food packaging pose numerous threats to human health** - particularly the health of children. The health of low-income, rural, and communities of color – who lack access to fresh and unpackaged food – [are disproportionately impacted](#).

While the environmental threats posed by plastics and food packaging are well-documented, data cited in today's Consensus Statement and the responding Call to Action, also indicate that urgent action is needed to protect public health from **harmful chemicals that migrate out of food packaging and contaminate food and beverages**.

Register for today's online press conference (1 PM ET):

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJYudOGvqDopv7jkrwwZd-WapTQ23gpQnw>

Over 12,000 chemicals are used in the making of food packaging – such as microwave popcorn bags, pastry bags, fast food wrappers, plates, bowls, food trays, take-out containers and other food packaging - many of which cause harm to human health. An enormous body of research - over 1200 studies- shows that these chemicals migrate from packaging into food and beverages. Current **regulatory systems have failed to ensure** chemicals used in food packaging are safe.

The Consensus statement **highlights several groups of chemicals that are hazardous to human health** and yet are still authorized for use in food packaging. These include per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, termed "Forever Chemicals" because they take thousands of years to break down in the environment and can remain in our bodies for decades (and are now in the blood of [99 percent of Americans](#)), ortho-phthalates, perchlorate, and bisphenols. **These chemicals have been linked to cancer, decreased fertility and other reproductive harm, adverse developmental effects and decreased immune response in children**. PFAS have been shown to migrate from food packaging into compost then to groundwater, soil, and crops where the compost is used.

"Families want to put food on the table that supports their children's health and wellbeing," **said Linda Birnbaum, retired Director of the NIEHS and the National Toxicology Program**. "But it's next to impossible to find options that aren't wrapped in food packaging containing chemicals that threaten human health. Current safety evaluations fail to consider impacts of very low dose exposures on the endocrine system and this puts children at the greatest risk of harm."

To date, the chemical industry's response to these proven health risks has primarily resulted in a dangerous game of [chemical "whack-a-mole"](#) in which industry simply replaces one toxic chemical with slightly altered substitutions (for example, bisphenol-A replaced with bisphenol-S) renamed and rebranded as safe, yet no less hazardous.

Human exposure tests reveal that there are **many harmful chemicals in the human body and that food packaging is a significant source of exposure**. At least 3,221 chemicals have been measured in human blood. Food packaging chemicals are present in food at far higher levels than pesticide residues (100 times higher). And the industry doesn't have to

disclose them as ingredients. Worse, human exposure to health-threatening chemicals in food packaging is likely under-estimated as a result of a failed and an industry-friendly regulatory system.

“It is a long past time for our leaders to phase out the use of harmful chemicals in food packaging,” **said Sarah Doll of Safer States**. “The good news is that several states are already leading the way. States like Maine and Washington are phasing out PFAS and phthalates from food packaging and more states have introduced policies to do the same. Retailers are also starting to phase out some of these chemicals but we need more and faster action, both from our government and from corporate leaders, if we are to solve this problem.”

Single-use food packaging has largely replaced reusable and refillable packaging across the globe. In 2014, [69.6 million metric tons of packaging waste](#) was collected in municipal solid waste in the U.S. alone. Plastics are rapidly replacing other forms of packaging as plastic production has [increased from 2 million tons in 1950 to over 380 million tons](#) in 2015 world-wide.

“Scientists have now shown us that microplastics are in the food we eat, water we drink, and air we breathe,” **said Miriam Gordon of UPSTREAM**. “The good news is that there are safer alternatives available, and there’s nothing stopping us from making the change today.” In view of the findings, the signatories to the **Call to Action urge lawmakers and industry to:**

1. Ensure full disclosure and traceability of chemicals used in packaging throughout the supply chain;
2. Restrict the use of hazardous chemicals in food packaging (and products), and prevent regrettable substitutions;
3. End the use of single-use plastics for food packaging by 2025 by adopting policies that support the transition towards safe, reusable, and refillable packaging.

[City](#) and [state](#) governments across the country are beginning to focus on policies that can transition to safer packaging. Policies enacted in Maine and Washington will reduce PFAS and phthalates used in food packaging. While versions of an ordinance (created by UPSTREAM) that makes sit-down dining throw-away-free (no more single-use when dining-in) have passed in the California cities of Berkeley, San Anselmo, Fairfax, and Humbolt, while others are mandating charges on take-out disposables (Watsonville, Santa Cruz, California and Vancouver, B.C.). Similar measures are being considered in communities all over the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles and New York City.

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[UPSTREAM](#) works with businesses, schools, and communities to transition to a throw-away-free culture. We have launched campaigns across the country to make single-use history and “indisposable” the new norm.

[The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences](#) (NIEHS)’s mission is to discover how the environment affects people in order to promote healthier lives. It’s vision is to provide global leadership for innovative research that improves public health by preventing disease and disability.

[Safer States](#) seeks to create a safer world by uniting around strong standards that prevent big businesses from polluting and protect people from physical and economic harm.

[GAIA](#) (Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives) is a worldwide alliance of grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, and individuals whose mission is to catalyze a global shift towards environmental justice by strengthening grassroots social movements that advance solutions to waste and pollution.

[Zero Waste Europe](#) is the European network of communities, local leaders, businesses, experts, and change agents working towards the same vision: phasing out waste from our society. We empower communities to redesign their relationship with resources, to adopt smarter lifestyles and sustainable consumption patterns, and to think circular.