

In a plastics world — on safe bottled water

Plastics are now widely present in the environment, as visible waste along coastlines, in lakes and rivers, and even in the soil. The recent finding that microplastic particles are found even in 'safe' bottled water indicates the magnitude of the crisis. There is little doubt that the global production of plastics, at over 300 million tonnes a year according to the UN Environment Programme, has overwhelmed the capacity of governments to handle what is thrown away as waste. Microplastics are particles of less than 5 mm that enter the environment either as primary industrial products, such as those used in scrubbers and cosmetics, or via urban waste water and broken-down elements of articles discarded by consumers. Washing of clothes releases synthetic microfibres into water bodies and the sea. The health impact of the presence of polypropylene, polyethylene terephthalate and other chemicals in drinking water, food and even inhaled air may not yet be clear, but indisputably these are contaminants. Research evidence from complementary fields indicates that accumulation of these chemicals can induce or aggravate immune responses in the body. More studies, as a globally coordinated effort, are necessary to assess the impact on health. It is heartening that the WHO has come forward to commission a review of the health impact of plastics in water.

Last December in Nairobi, UN member-countries resolved to produce a binding agreement in 18 months to deal with the release of plastics into the marine environment. The problem is staggering: eight million tonnes of waste, including bottles and packaging, make their way into the sea each year. There is now even the Great Pacific Garbage Patch of plastic debris. India has a major problem dealing with plastics, particularly single-use shopping bags that reach dumping sites, rivers and wetlands along with other waste. The most efficient way to deal with the pollution is to control the production and distribution of plastics. Banning single-use bags and making consumers pay a significant amount for the more durable ones is a feasible solution. Enforcing the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, which require segregation of waste from April 8 this year, will retrieve materials and greatly reduce the burden on the environment. Waste separation can be achieved in partnership with the community, and presents a major employment opportunity. The goal, however, has to be long term. As the European Union's vision 2030 document on creating a circular plastic economy explains, the answer lies in changing the very nature of plastics, from cheap and disposable to durable, reusable and fully recyclable. There is consensus that this is the way forward. Now that the presence of plastics in drinking water, including the bottled variety, has been documented, governments should realise it cannot be business as usual.

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