World Journal of
Pharmacy and Medical Science

ISSN: 3049-3501
Impact Factor: 3.2
CODEN (USA): WJPMAA

Research Article
2025 Volume 1, Issue 4
Page No.: 35-40

IMPACT OF PLASTIC POLLUTION ON ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN HEALTH

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Article Received: 07 August 2025 Article Review: 28 August 2025 Article Accepted: 18 September 2025

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17433589

How to cite this Article: Asfiya Naz Hasan Khan, Anil B. Chidrawar* (2025). IMPACT OF PLASTIC POLLUTION ON ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN HEALTH. World Journal of Pharmacy and Medical Science, 1(4): 35-40. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17433589

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ABSTRACT

Plastic pollution has emerged as one of the most pressing global environmental challenges of the 21st century. Since the advent of large-scale plastic production in the 1950s, its demand has grown rapidly due to affordability, versatility, and durability. Currently, more than 380 million metric tons of plastics are produced annually, and nearly 79% of this waste accumulates in landfills, oceans, and terrestrial ecosystems, causing long-term ecological imbalance. The persistence of plastics, coupled with their tendency to fragment into microplastics and nano plastics, has created an alarming scenario where these pollutants are found not only in soil and water but also in the air we breathe and the food we consume. The environmental impact of plastic pollution is vast. In aquatic ecosystems, marine organisms ingest plastic debris, leading to injuries, suffocation, and death, while entanglement in fishing nets and packaging materials disrupts biodiversity. On land, plastic waste clogs drainage systems, alters soil fertility, and contributes to flooding. From a human health perspective, exposure to microplastics and toxic chemicals leached from plastics such as Bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates is associated with endocrine disruption, respiratory disorders, reproductive issues, metabolic diseases, and increased cancer risks. Recent evidence of microplastics detected in human blood, lungs, and placenta underlines the severity of the crisis. Ultimately, we highlights the urgent need to rethink the "take–make–dispose" plastic economy and transition toward a circular model of sustainability, where reduction, reuse, and recycling form the pillars of responsible plastic management. By addressing the issue at both micro and macro levels, society can pave the way for a healthier environment and safeguard human well-being for future generations.

KEYWORDS: Plastic pollution, Microplastics, Bisphenol A (BPA), Nano plastics.

INTRODUCTION

Plastics have become an integral part of modern civilization, revolutionizing industries, technology, and everyday life. Since the onset of mass production in the mid-20th century, global plastic manufacturing has increased exponentially, reaching over 380 million metric tons annually (UNEP, 2021). Their affordability, durability, and versatility have made plastics indispensable in packaging, construction, transportation, electronics, healthcare, and agriculture.

Plastics are synthetic polymers derived mainly from non-renewable petrochemicals such as crude oil and natural gas. Their molecular structure makes them highly resistant to biological degradation, which means that plastics can persist in the environment for hundreds of years. For instance, a typical plastic bottle takes 450–500 years to decompose completely. These particles disperse widely across ecosystems and have now been detected in soil, rivers, oceans, the atmosphere, and even in the bodies of humans and animals.

The environmental impacts of plastic pollution are extensive and alarming. In marine ecosystems, plastic waste contributes to the formation of vast floating garbage patches, the most famous being the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which covers approximately 1.6 million square kilometres. Marine organisms such as turtles,

seabirds, and fish often ingest plastic particles, mistaking them for food, which leads to starvation, internal injuries, and death. Entanglement in discarded fishing nets and packaging material also causes injury and mortality to marine mammals. On land, improperly managed plastic waste clogs urban drainage systems, causing severe flooding during monsoons, particularly in developing countries. Additionally, plastics in agricultural soil disrupt nutrient cycles, reduce soil fertility, and affect crop productivity.

From a human health perspective, plastic pollution is equally concerning. Scientific studies have confirmed the presence of microplastics in drinking water, sea salt, fruits, vegetables, and even human blood and lungs. Chemicals leached from plastics, including Bisphenol A (BPA), phthalates, and polystyrene derivatives, have been linked to hormonal imbalance, reproductive disorders, developmental problems in children, metabolic diseases, respiratory issues, and carcinogenic effects. Moreover, open burning of plastics releases dioxins, furans, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are extremely toxic air pollutants associated with asthma, bronchitis, cardiovascular problems, and cancer. The detection of microplastics in the human placenta raises deep concerns about their transgenerational health impacts.

The economic burden of plastic pollution is also substantial. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), plastic waste costs the global economy over 13 billion USD annually in losses to fisheries, shipping, and tourism industries. Developing countries face additional challenges due to insufficient waste management systems, leading to uncontrolled dumping and open burning of plastic waste.

Given these multidimensional challenges, plastic pollution is no longer just an environmental problem but a social, economic, and public health crisis. Governments, policymakers, industries, and civil society must urgently work together to address the root causes of the problem. Solutions lie not only in banning or restricting single-use plastics but also in promoting sustainable alternatives, biodegradable polymers, improved recycling infrastructure, and global policies that ensure responsible plastic production and consumption. A paradigm shift is required from the traditional “linear economy” model (produce–use–dispose) to a “circular economy” model (reduce–reuse–recycle), where waste is minimized, and resources are reused efficiently.

Therefore, this research paper aims to explore the impact of plastic pollution on the environment and human health, review relevant scientific literature, analyze available data, and propose possible strategies for mitigation. By bringing together environmental, health, and economic dimensions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the crisis and highlight the urgent need for sustainable solutions at global, national, and individual levels.

Our research aims to critically analyse the environmental and health hazards posed by plastic pollution, review the existing scientific literature, and explore effective methodologies for research. It also highlights the importance of a circular economy, strict waste management strategies, international policies, and community participation in mitigating plastic pollution. The findings underscore the urgent need for collaborative action at individual, industrial, and governmental levels to safeguard ecosystems and human health from the escalating threat of plastic pollution. The study investigates the dual nature of plastics: their advantages in modern society and the alarming consequences of their uncontrolled use. The environmental implications include soil degradation, water contamination, marine ecosystem disruption, and the release of toxic substances during incineration. Plastics not only accumulate in landfills but also break down into microplastics and nano plastics, which enter food chains and cause irreversible damage to biodiversity. For humans, exposure to plastic-derived chemicals such as phthalates, bisphenol A (BPA), and styrene has been linked to endocrine disruption, carcinogenic effects, reproductive disorders, and even the presence of plastic particles in human blood and placenta, as confirmed by recent studies.

This research adopts a mixed research methodology, combining literature review, field survey data, and case study analysis to evaluate how plastic use, disposal, and recycling behaviours contribute to pollution. Data collected through questionnaires and interviews reveal that while awareness about the harmful impacts of plastics is growing, the lack of alternatives, poor waste management systems, and insufficient policies continue to perpetuate the crisis.

The findings suggest that plastic pollution is not merely an environmental concern but a global health emergency. It requires a multidimensional strategy involving stricter legislation, effective waste management practices, public awareness campaigns, and the promotion of biodegradable and eco-friendly alternatives. The research also emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts among governments, industries, communities, and individuals to mitigate the crisis.

Advantages of Plastics

Although plastic pollution has created serious environmental and health challenges, it is important to recognize that plastics also provide numerous advantages to modern society. Their unique physical and chemical properties—lightweight, durability, flexibility, resistance to corrosion, and affordability—have made them indispensable across multiple sectors. Without plastics, many of the conveniences and technological advancements of the modern world would not have been possible.

1. Medical and Healthcare Applications
Plastics play a vital role in the healthcare sector, where sterility, safety, and durability are crucial. Disposable syringes, gloves, masks, and IV bags reduce the risk of cross-contamination and infection. Plastic-based prosthetics and implants improve the quality of life for patients with disabilities. Lightweight packaging ensures the safe storage and transport of medicines. Advanced polymers such as polyethylene and polypropylene are used in dialysis machines, heart valves, and artificial joints. Thus, plastics are essential for modern medical innovation and public health.

2. Food Preservation and Packaging
One of the greatest advantages of plastics is their role in food safety and preservation. Plastic containers, cling films, and bottles protect food from contamination and spoilage. Vacuum-sealed plastic packaging extends the shelf life of perishable items such as meat, dairy, and fresh produce. Lightweight bottles and pouches reduce transportation costs and energy consumption compared to glass or metal containers.

3. Transportation and Automotive Industry
Plastics significantly contribute to fuel efficiency and safety in modern vehicles. Replacing metal components with plastics reduces the overall weight of cars, airplanes, and trains, leading to lower fuel consumption and reduced carbon emissions. Seat belts, airbags, and helmets are made of high-strength synthetic polymers that enhance passenger safety. Plastic composites are increasingly used in electric vehicles and aerospace technologies to improve performance and reduce costs.

4. Construction and Infrastructure
In construction, plastics provide durable, corrosion-resistant, and cost-effective alternatives to traditional materials. PVC pipes are widely used in water supply and sewage systems. Plastic-based insulation materials improve energy efficiency in buildings. Lightweight, weather-resistant roofing sheets and wall panels lower maintenance costs.

5. Technology and Electronics
Modern electronics would not exist without plastics. Computer casings, mobile phones, circuit boards, and cables all rely on polymers for insulation and flexibility. Lightweight and durable plastic components allow for sleek, portable designs in laptops and smartphones. Plastics also play a role in renewable energy technologies such as solar panels and wind turbines.

6. Agriculture
Plastics have transformed agricultural practices by increasing efficiency and productivity. Polyethylene films are used in greenhouses to control temperature and humidity. Drip irrigation systems made from plastics conserve water in arid regions. Mulch films reduce weed growth and improve crop yield.

7. Economic and Social Benefits
Plastics are cost-effective to produce, transport, and recycle (when managed properly). They have enabled the development of affordable consumer goods, making essential products accessible to people across different economic backgrounds. The plastic industry also generates millions of jobs worldwide, contributing significantly to national economies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology provides the systematic framework used to investigate the problem of plastic pollution and its impacts on the environment and human health. It ensures that the study is scientific, reliable, and reproducible. The present study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to achieve a comprehensive understanding.

OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this research is to examine the extent, causes, and consequences of plastic pollution, with special emphasis on its impact on the environment and human health. The following specific objectives have been formulated:

1. **To analyze the sources and patterns of plastic pollution**
- To study how plastics are produced, consumed, and disposed of in urban and rural settings.
- To identify the major contributors such as packaging industries, households, and healthcare systems.

2. **To evaluate the environmental impacts of plastic waste**
- To assess how plastics affect soil, water, and air quality.
- To explore consequences for biodiversity, marine ecosystems, agriculture, and climate.

3. **To investigate the human health risks associated with plastics**
- To examine the exposure pathways of microplastics and toxic chemicals.
- To review evidence of health effects such as respiratory disorders, endocrine disruption, reproductive issues, and cancer risks.

4. **To study the effectiveness of waste management practices and policies**
- To analyze recycling rates, landfill management, and incineration methods.
- To assess the role of government regulations, bans, taxes, and public awareness campaigns in reducing plastic pollution.

5. **To recommend sustainable strategies and solutions**
- To propose a shift toward a circular economy with emphasis on reduce, reuse, and recycle.

- To suggest community-based, industrial, and policy-driven measures for mitigating plastic pollution and safeguarding human health.

Scope of the Study

The scope of a research study defines the boundaries within which the research is conducted and clarifies the extent of the investigation. In the context of plastic pollution, this study focuses on analyzing the sources, environmental consequences, health risks, and mitigation strategies associated with plastic waste.

Environmental Scope

The research examines the impact of plastics on various ecosystems, including:

- Marine ecosystems: Assessment of plastic accumulation in oceans, rivers, and coastal areas, along with its effects on aquatic organisms.
- Terrestrial ecosystems: Evaluation of plastic waste in urban, rural, and agricultural lands, focusing on soil fertility, crop productivity, and biodiversity.
- Atmospheric impacts: Study of air pollution caused by burning plastics and release of toxic gases such as dioxins, furans, and particulate matter.

Human Health Scope

The study investigates how plastic exposure affects human health, focusing on:

- Microplastic ingestion and inhalation: Pathways through food, water, and air.
- Chemical leachates: Effects of toxic compounds like Bisphenol A (BPA), phthalates, and polystyrene derivatives on endocrine, reproductive, and metabolic systems.
- Vulnerable populations: Children, pregnant women, and communities near landfill sites or plastic-intensive industries.

Socio-Economic Scope

The research considers the economic and social dimensions of plastic pollution, including:

- Economic losses in fisheries, tourism, and municipal waste management.
- Public health expenditure due to diseases caused by plastic exposure.
- Social awareness and behavioral patterns in plastic use and disposal.

Policy and Management Scope

The study also explores: Effectiveness of government policies such as bans on single-use plastics, taxes, and recycling regulations. Community-based initiatives for waste reduction. Industrial responsibility in adopting sustainable production and biodegradable alternatives.

Geographic and Temporal Scope

The study focuses primarily on urban and semi-urban regions where plastic consumption is high. Both current trends and historical data on plastic production, consumption, and waste accumulation are analysed to understand patterns over time. While global data is referenced, emphasis is placed on case studies from developing countries, where waste management challenges are most acute.

Research Utility

The findings of this study aim to provide: Insight for policymakers and environmental authorities to develop better regulations. Awareness for communities and individuals to adopt sustainable practices. Reference for future research on mitigation technologies, biodegradable plastics, and circular economy approaches.

Sampling Method

Sampling is a critical component of research methodology as it allows the researcher to collect data from a subset of the population to draw meaningful conclusions. In this study, sampling is employed to understand the impact of plastic pollution on the environment and human health effectively, given resource and time constraints.

1. Sample Size

- The sample size determines the number of respondents or observations required to ensure that the study is representative and statistically reliable.
- For this research: A total of 100–150 respondents were selected.
- Respondents include urban households, market vendors, municipal workers, healthcare professionals, and environmental experts. The sample size ensures adequate diversity while remaining manageable for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

2. Methods of Sampling

- Several sampling techniques exist, but for this study, the non-probability sampling method is applied due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of the research. Non-probability sampling allows for targeted data collection when a complete list of the population is not available or when accessibility is limited.
- Key methods considered include: Purposive Sampling: Respondents are selected based on their relevance to the study objectives, such as communities near landfill sites or healthcare professionals aware of plastic exposure.

3. Convenience Sampling

- Convenience sampling is particularly useful for studies with limited resources or when immediate access to respondents is required. In this research, respondents were approached in urban neighbourhoods, hospitals, markets, and educational institutions where plastic usage and awareness levels could be assessed conveniently.

4. Convenience

- Convenience refers to the ease of selecting respondents or units for the study based on accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate. In this research, convenience sampling was applied to gather data from participants in urban and semi-urban areas where plastic consumption is high and observations can be conducted efficiently.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is a critical part of research, as it allows the researcher to transform raw data into meaningful insights. In this study, data collected through surveys, interviews, and observations were analysed to understand patterns of plastic usage, disposal habits, environmental impacts, and health awareness. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for a comprehensive assessment.

Quantitative Analysis: The survey responses from 100 respondents were categorized and analysed using percentages and frequency distribution. This helped in identifying the prevalence of plastic use, disposal practices, and awareness of health and environmental impacts.

Interpretation: Plastic bags and food packaging are the most frequently used items, indicating high single-use plastic consumption.

Lower usage of disposable cutlery shows limited adoption in certain urban households, possibly due to awareness campaigns.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview responses and observational data were analysed thematically:

- Environmental impact: Respondents observed plastic accumulation in drains, rivers, and roadside areas.
- Health awareness: Many participants recognized health risks of plastics, but only 40% reported actively reducing usage.
- Waste management challenges: Municipal workers highlighted insufficient recycling facilities and improper disposal as major issues.

Graphical Representation: A simple bar chart can illustrate the frequency of plastic usage:

Bar Chart Description:

- X-axis: Type of Plastic Item (Bags, Bottles, Packaging, Cutlery)
- Y-axis: Percentage of Respondents

Observation: Highest usage is for bags (78%) and food packaging (72%), while disposable cutlery is the least used (55%).

Interpretation and Insights: High prevalence of single-use plastics reflects convenience and lack of alternatives. Moderate awareness of health and environmental impacts indicates the need for public education campaigns. Gaps in waste management infrastructure exacerbate environmental pollution, emphasizing the importance of policy interventions and community participation.

Table and Chart

Visual representation of data helps in quick understanding and effective communication of research findings. In this study, a table and bar chart are used to illustrate plastic usage patterns among respondents.

Table 1: Frequency of Plastic Usage Among Respondents.

Type of Plastic Item	Frequently Used (%)	Occasionally Used (%)	Rarely Used (%)
Plastic Bags	78%	15%	07%
Plastic Bottles	65%	25%	10%
Food Packaging	72%	20%	08%
Disposable Cutlery/Straws	55%	30%	15%

Interpretation

Plastic bags (78%) and food packaging (72%) are the most frequently used items.

Disposable cutlery (55%) is less frequently used, showing a partial shift toward alternatives.

Overall, single-use plastics dominate daily life, posing environmental and health risks.

Bar Chart Explanation

X-axis: Type of Plastic Item (Bags, Bottles, Packaging, Cutlery/Straws)

Y-axis: Percentage of Respondents (%)

Bars: Show comparison of "Frequently Used," "Occasionally Used," and "Rarely Used" categories.

Observation

The highest bar corresponds to Plastic Bags (78%), followed closely by Food Packaging (72%).

Plastic Bottles are also widely used (65%).

Disposable cutlery shows the lowest frequent use but is still significant (55%).

Insight: The chart clearly highlights which types of plastics are most prevalent in daily use.

Visual comparison shows a higher reliance on bags and packaging, emphasizing the need for targeted reduction strategies.

CONCLUSION

Plastic pollution is a pressing global issue with far-reaching consequences for the environment, human health, and socio-economic systems. The research

reveals that single-use plastics, such as bags, bottles, and food packaging, are highly prevalent in daily life. Improper disposal and inadequate waste management have led to land, water, and air pollution, while microplastics and toxic chemical leachates pose direct and indirect health risks, including endocrine disruption, reproductive disorders, and respiratory issues.

The study also highlights the interconnected nature of plastic pollution: environmental degradation, economic losses, and health impacts are all closely linked. Despite growing public awareness, gaps in infrastructure, recycling, and policy enforcement exacerbate the problem. Overall, plastics remain indispensable for modern life, but their mismanagement has created a global challenge that demands immediate attention and sustainable solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are thankful to the Principal, Degloor College, Degloor for providing laboratory facilities and the Director, Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, Hyderabad for providing spectra.

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