

Phasing Out PFAS in Europe: Urgent Actions to Protect Health and Environment

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Why action is needed now

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) exposure is a major public health risk in Europe. More than half of Europeans are exposed by food to key PFAS above safe levels. Scientific evidence links exposure to several adverse health effects, including weakened immune response in children. At the same time, the proposed universal PFAS restriction under the EU's chemicals regulation REACH offers a unique policy window. Without coordinated action now, people will continue to be exposed for decades, and possibly centuries. Action is needed now to protect health and stop these so-called “forever chemicals” from building up further in the environment¹⁻³.

Policy problem

PFAS break down very slowly, move easily in the environment, and build up in people and nature over time. Widespread use in industry and consumer products has resulted in global exposure.

The JA PreventNCD mapping and analysis of legislative frameworks in Europe showed that current EU and international regulations cover only a small number of PFAS and sectors. This leaves major gaps in protection. Similarly, food legislation sets limits for only a few PFAS in selected food products. EU countries apply drinking water regulations differently. As a result, people are not protected equally across Europe. Environmental regulations are improving, but they still do not cover all relevant PFAS or all ways people are exposed. Monitoring is still incomplete, especially human biomonitoring (measuring PFAS concentrations in people). This makes it harder to know who is exposed and whether policies work. At the same time, PFAS-containing products continue to enter the EU market through global trade.

Without coordinated and harmonised EU action, these regulatory gaps will continue to allow widespread and sustained exposure.

Key recommendations

- **Adopt and implement a universal PFAS restriction in the EU**

Stop new emissions and prevent companies from replacing one PFAS with another.

- **Apply a strict essential-use framework**

Phase out non-essential uses. Allow exemptions only when clearly justified and time-limited. Support safer alternatives for essential uses.

- **Expand regulatory limits and harmonise monitoring**

Monitor more PFAS, in more sample types, including human biomonitoring.

- **Strengthen global agreements and import controls**

Make sure imported products follow EU PFAS regulations. Prevent PFAS pollution from being shifted to countries with weaker regulations.

Main findings and supporting evidence

PFAS are highly persistent, many are mobile and some build up in living organisms. They have contaminated the environment, and people are exposed across Europe¹. People are mainly exposed through food, drinking water, and consumer products, and according to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), a large share of the population exceeds safe levels².

Although thousands of PFAS exist, health effects have been thoroughly studied for only a limited number of substances. Nevertheless, the available evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that PFAS can harm human health. The strongest evidence shows that some PFAS can weaken the immune system by reducing the body's response to vaccines and potentially making people more susceptible to infections². This effect was identified by EFSA as the critical health outcome for establishing the current health-based guidance value (safe levels). Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS), two of the most extensively studied PFAS, have been classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) as carcinogenic to humans and possibly carcinogenic to humans, respectively³. Studies have also associated PFAS exposure with higher cholesterol levels, altered liver function, and lower birth weight².

Recent estimates indicate that PFAS pollution may impose health-related and environmental costs of up to tens of billions of euros annually in Europe, even when considering only the few well-studied PFAS⁴.

Widespread exposure, combined with high persistence and limited toxicological information for most PFAS, supports a precautionary approach focused on preventing further emissions and reducing exposure.

Key recommendations for reducing PFAS exposure in Europe

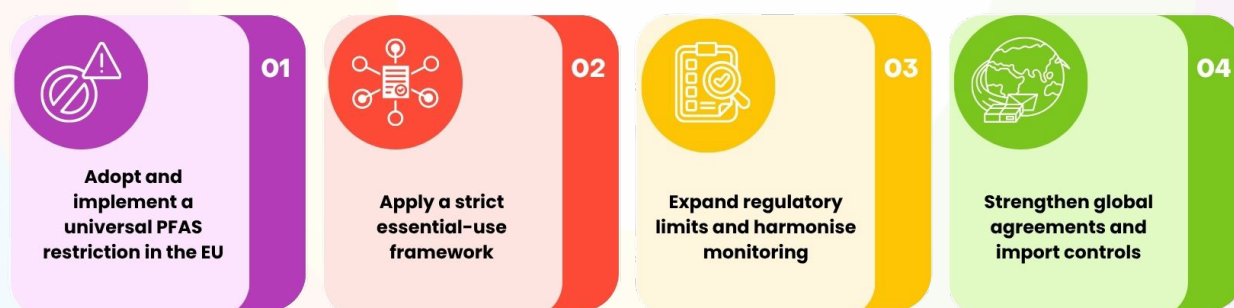


Figure: Key recommendations for reducing PFAS exposure in Europe

This calls for action at the emission source, including phasing out the production and non-essential uses of PFAS. Recent mapping and analyses conducted within JA PreventNCD show that regulatory actions on PFAS are increasing across Europe⁵. Similar findings were also reported by the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)⁶. Global bans on PFOS, PFOA and perfluorohexane sulfonic acid (PFHxS) are implemented through the Stockholm Convention and EU Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) legislation, while REACH restricts several PFAS groups in consumer products⁵. New rules for sectors such as toys and packaging increasingly restrict PFAS as a group. However, the current regulations still cover only selected PFAS and uses, leaving gaps and a risk of replacing one PFAS with another.

Adopting and implementing a universal PFAS restriction in the EU would close these regulatory gaps and prevent emissions from new uses and thereby contribute to reduced exposure. Where immediate substitution is not yet possible, **a strict essential-use framework should be applied** so that continued use is limited to applications that are essential for health, safety or the functioning of society and for which suitable alternatives are not yet available.

The JA PreventNCD analysis also identified important gaps in regulatory limits and monitoring⁵. The EU food legislation establishes maximum levels for only four PFAS in selected food categories⁷, despite additional dietary sources. The Drinking Water Directive sets two PFAS parameters⁸, but its implementation varies across Member States. Differences in national legislation result in uneven levels of protection across the EU. Environmental legislation remains incomplete, currently addressing only a limited number of PFAS⁹.

Because PFAS levels in people are not regularly measured in the same way across Europe, we lack comparable data on exposure, which groups are most affected, and whether policies are working. Monitoring in food, drinking water and the environment is also needed to identify important exposure sources and contaminated areas, and can inform targeted measures such as dietary advice and decisions on where remediation should be prioritised. Together, these gaps highlight the need to **expand regulatory limits and harmonise monitoring across Europe**.

Global supply chains create an additional regulatory gap. If EU rules become stricter without coordinated international action, production and pollution may shift to countries with weaker controls¹⁰. PFAS-containing products may also continue to enter the EU through imports and online sales, undermining the effectiveness of EU measures. Thus, there is a need to **strengthen global agreements and import controls**.

Implementation considerations

PFAS policies will only work if EU institutions and national authorities coordinate actions closely. The proposed universal PFAS restriction under REACH will require robust enforcement, clear and time-limited exemptions based on the essential use principle, and enough staff, expertise, and resources across EU countries to enforce the rules.

Expanding regulatory standards and monitoring systems will require investments in laboratory capacity, harmonised methodologies and long-term data collection, including human biomonitoring. EU countries need comparable data to see whether policies are working and to identify populations at higher risk. Under the EU's new 'One Substance, One Assessment' (OSOA) framework, an EU-wide human biomonitoring study is to be commissioned by 2030 to improve knowledge of chemical exposure in the population.

Beyond regulatory measures and monitoring, several important supporting actions are needed. Contaminated sites must be cleaned up because old PFAS pollution will remain for decades. Large-scale remediation of contaminated sites will require sustained funding, clear prioritisation and the development of effective technologies. Because cleanup is expensive and takes time, public–private partnerships and EU funding mechanisms will play a key role in supporting implementation.

Complementary measures can further support implementation. Public awareness campaigns and targeted guidance can help reduce exposure at the population level, particularly in highly contaminated areas and among vulnerable groups. At the same time, green public procurement can incentivise safer alternatives and support innovation.

Finally, strong international cooperation and enhanced import controls are essential to ensure that EU measures are not undermined by global trade and the relocation of production and pollution. International cooperation is needed to make EU action effective and to avoid shifting harm to other countries or groups.

Conclusions / next steps

PFAS pollution represents a long-term threat to health and the environment. Fragmented action will not be enough.

Europe needs a coordinated approach: regulate PFAS as a group, strengthen standards and monitoring, clean up contaminated sites, and cooperate internationally.

The upcoming EU PFAS restriction is an important opportunity to reduce toxic pollution. It will succeed only if it is implemented quickly, enforced strongly, and supported politically over time.

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