

How can standards help protect us from harmful chemicals?

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Standards are essential for restricting harmful chemicals

Standards ensure that all products in the EU are tested in the same way - so no matter where you buy something, you can be sure it meets the same rules on quality, performance, and safety. For any legislation to be effective, it must be backed by strong standards.

“When the development of standards is delayed, this can undermine and delay bans on harmful substances in our products.

When it comes to chemicals, standards are essential for testing - so that every lab in the EU will use the same method to test if products contain banned or limited substances. These standards help authorities remove and prevent unsafe products from the market, to protect both our health and the environment from harmful chemicals.

Without standard testing methods, it can be difficult to keep harmful products off the market as testing procedures and results will differ between EU Member States. Chemical bans or restrictions are also often delayed when standard testing methods are not in place.



New EU rules on chemicals mean new standards are needed



New testing standards must be developed when new chemical rules or restrictions are introduced, but developing a testing standard can take a long time - the process requires financial resources and capacity from laboratories and industry actors. Restrictions often occur after years of negotiation and analysis, it is therefore very important that the already long timeline of implementation is not further delayed by a lack of standards.

The EU will soon implement broader restrictions on harmful chemicals with endocrine-disrupting properties - both under specific chemical regulation as well as product-specific rules for toys or food packaging. It is essential that standardisation organisations work proactively to update or develop new testing standards, so that these new and vital restrictions can be swiftly implemented.

“The sooner new standards are ready, the sooner people and the environment are protected against harmful substances.

What are endocrine-disrupting chemicals?

Endocrine-disrupting chemicals, or EDCs, are substances that interfere with our hormones. They can cause problems with reproduction, brain development, metabolism, cancers, and potentially other problems.^{1,2}

Many types of chemicals can be endocrine-disrupting. Both PFAS or 'forever chemicals', and bisphenols, such as BPA, have been identified with endocrine-disrupting properties.³

Where can EDCs be found?

EDCs can be found in many consumer products including, clothing, shoes, toys, or electronics.⁴ EDCs are often used to manufacture products with certain characteristics, such as waterproofing - or they are used to make plastic more flexible or resistant to UV light.⁵

A 2024 test of women's polyester garments showed that 10% of samples exceeded safe levels of bisphenols⁶ and PFAS are still being found on outdoor clothing.⁷



Are endocrine-disrupting chemicals banned in products in the EU?



Yes and no. The regulation of endocrine-disrupting chemicals is still developing.

Some EDCs are restricted globally under the UN's [Stockholm Convention](#) - whilst others are restricted or limited in the EU under the [REACH Regulation](#) or via product-specific regulations, e.g. [Food Contact Materials Regulation](#) or [Toy Safety Regulation](#).

It is likely that more EDCs will be regulated in more products in the future. There is already an EU proposal to ban PFAS chemicals in many products and the new Toy Safety Regulation bans endocrine-disrupting chemicals in toys (these restrictions will be implemented by 2030).

For other products, such as clothing or footwear, the EU may decide to restrict chemicals that prevent recycling, which includes some endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Are EDCs an issue for the circular economy?

Some of these harmful substances do not break down – they remain in materials which means that they cannot be recycled.⁸ Flame retardants, PFAS, and chlorinated paraffins, for example, can also contaminate waste that could otherwise be recycled.⁸ Phasing out these substances from products not only helps to protect our health but also supports the transition to a clean and circular economy.



What is the role of standards in detecting EDCs?

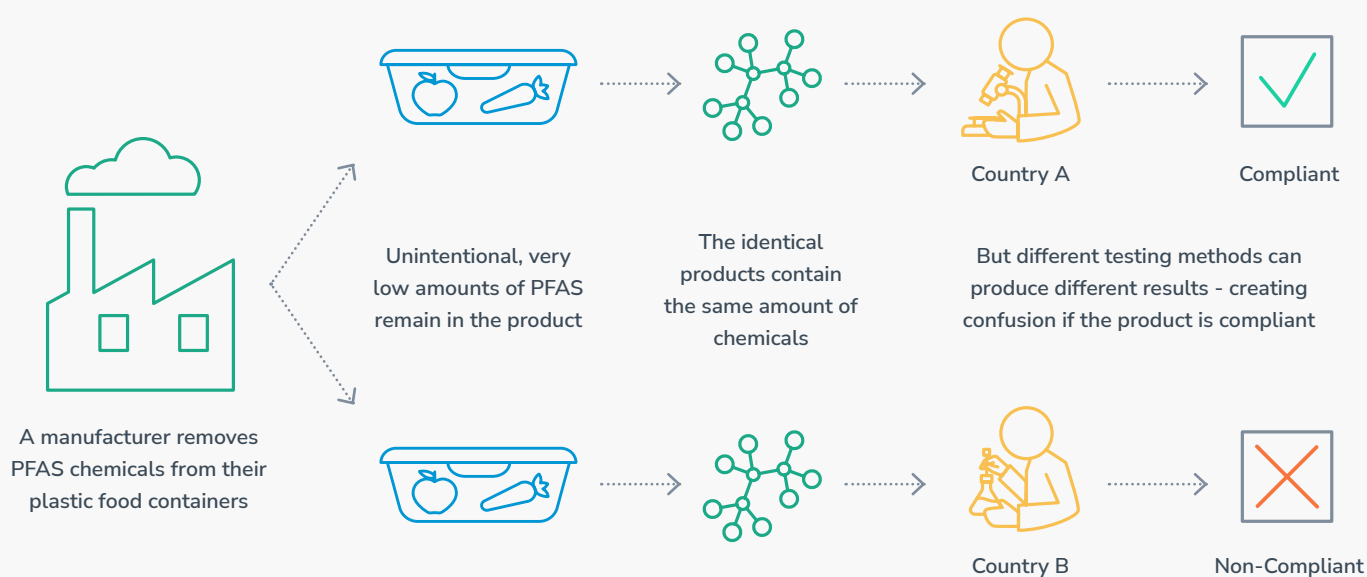
Standardised analytical or testing methods are an important tool for enforcing chemical restrictions and bans – they create a level playing field for the EU Single Market and ensure every Member State can uphold EU regulations on chemicals in products. These standardised tests are designed to detect a target substance in materials or products.

It is important that the methods are specific enough - so that testing is accurate for the material or product, as well as the target substance. These standardised methods must be kept up to date and fit for purpose to reflect current scientific developments, and they must be able to detect to the lowest possible levels.

Currently, there is no comprehensive standardised testing for PFAS chemicals, which are found in a wide range of products. This means that for food packaging, for example, there are no adequate standard testing methods that are ready for the upcoming ban on PFAS (under the EU's new [Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation](#)). This causes complications within the food contact packaging supply chain - without a standardised testing method, different Member States could use different tests to prove compliance, despite potentially different results for the same product.

Imagine a plastic food container that is sold across the EU. The manufacturer has phased out PFAS in accordance with the EU's ban, but an unintentional and very low amount of PFAS chemicals still remains in the product. One method of testing used in country A shows that the product has compliant levels of PFAS (under the limit), but a different testing method used in country B, shows that the PFAS levels are too high, meaning the plastic container is not compliant. These two results from the same product create confusion for the market, a lack of clarity for enforcement, and inconsistent application of the rules. A standardised test method would ensure that testing in both countries uses the same techniques, follows the same procedures, and achieves the same result.

Without standardised methods, testing for restricted substances can be inconsistent



Standardisers can already review current standards and prioritise resources towards standardising further test methods to future-proof the standards for additional restrictions. Testing methods must be applicable to as many products and materials as possible, while still being targeted, accurate, and thorough. The methods must detect a broad range of substances within each chemical group, so that standards are future-proofed for additional restrictions.

There is an urgent need to develop additional and up-to-date testing standards for endocrine-disrupting chemicals, such as PFAS and bisphenols, as well as other EDCs that will likely be restricted in the future. These standards must be future-proof and replicable in testing laboratories across the EU by reflecting the most accurate scientific processes.

References

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- 5 Scientific American. [What Does Plastic Do to the Endocrine System?](#) (2024)
- 6 Arnika. [Ban Bisphenols in All Products - Policy Briefing Paper](#) (2024)
- 7 IPEN. [PFAS "Forever Chemicals" Found in Outerwear and Clothing Sold Globally](#) (2023)
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