Amit Singla. International Journal of Engineering Research and Applications*
www.ijera.com
ISSN: 2248-9622, Vol. 15, Issue 9, September 2025, pp 167-171

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Microplastics Across Environments: Pathways, Impacts, and Human Risks

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ABSTRACT
Microplastics, defined as plastic particles smaller than 5 millimeters, have emerged as an invisible but pervasive global pollutant. They originate from the fragmentation of larger plastics and from manufactured small particles such as microbeads and synthetic fibers. Once released, microplastics disperse widely across aquatic, terrestrial, and atmospheric systems, where they accumulate in organisms, disrupt ecological processes, and eventually infiltrate the human body. This paper traces the journey of microplastics from ecosystems to humans and evaluates their ecological, physiological, and socio-economic consequences. Case studies from oceans, soils, and the atmosphere illustrate their ubiquity, while recent findings of microplastics in human blood and placenta raise urgent health concerns. The discussion highlights not only the risks associated with microplastics but also the societal and economic costs they impose on fisheries, agriculture, and healthcare. Finally, the paper explores current mitigation strategies, including regulatory policies, technological innovations, public engagement, and research investment, emphasizing the need for global cooperation to address this escalating crisis.

***Keywords* -** Ecosystems, Hhuman health, Microplastics, Mitigation strategies, Pollution, Socio-economic impacts

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Date of Submission: 14-09-2025 Date of acceptance: 27-09-2025

I. INTRODUCTION

Plastics have become indispensable in modern society due to their versatility, durability, and low cost. Over the past 70 years, global plastic production has grown exponentially, leading to its pervasive presence in the environment—so much so that we now live in what can be termed a plastic world. These synthetic polymers not only act as environmental pollutants themselves but also serve as vectors for the transport of a wide range of chemicals. At the same time, plastics are increasingly regarded as reliable indicators of the modern era, particularly from the mid-20th century onwards.

Global plastic production now exceeds 390 million metric tons annually [1]. However, these same properties that make plastics useful also contribute to their environmental persistence. Unlike natural materials, plastics resist degradation, and over time, larger items fragment into smaller particles known as microplastics. Their diminutive size, persistence, and ability to bind harmful chemicals render microplastics a particularly insidious form of pollution. Microplastics, defined as plastic particles smaller than 5 millimeters, have infiltrated various ecosystems and subsequently the food chain, leading to their presence in the human body. Microplastics are plastic particles less than 5 millimeters in size, classified into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary microplastics are intentionally manufactured small, such as microbeads in cosmetics and industrial abrasives. Secondary microplastics result from the breakdown of larger plastic debris due to environmental factors like UV radiation, physical abrasion, and biodegradation. The primary concern is their potential health impacts, which are still being actively researched. This review paper examines the sources and pathways of microplastics into the food chain, their presence in the human body, potential health impacts, and mitigation strategies.

Microplastics were first identified as an environmental pollutant in the early 2000s. The growing production and disposal of plastics have led to an exponential increase in microplastic pollution, highlighting the need for urgent research and mitigation efforts. Microplastics are now found in virtually every corner of the planet, from deep ocean trenches to Arctic ice. Today, microplastic particles are ubiquitously detected in diverse shapes, polymer types, sizes, and concentrations across multiple environmental compartments, including marine and freshwater systems, agro ecosystems, the atmosphere, food and drinking water, biota, and even remote locations. They interact with ecosystems in complex ways, entering food webs and altering natural processes. Increasingly, they are also being detected in human tissues, raising concerns about their potential effects on human health. This paper examines the pathways by which microplastics move through ecosystems, the consequences of their accumulation in natural systems, the risks they pose to humans, their broader socio-economic implications, and the measures available to mitigate their spread.

II. JOURNEY OF MICROPLASTICS THROUGH ECOSYSTEMS

Microplastics originate from primary sources (manufactured small particles such as microbeads and nurdles) and secondary sources (fragmentation of larger plastics via UV radiation, mechanical abrasion, and microbial activity). Case studies across continents reveal that microplastics contaminate even the most remote environments, from the Mariana Trench to Arctic snow. Understanding the presence and impact of microplastics is crucial for public health, environmental sustainability, and policy development. This review aims to synthesize current knowledge on microplastics, identify research gaps, and propose strategies for mitigation. Figure 1 shows that millions of tonnes of plastic enters the environment every year, where it continues to build up.

Fig. 1: Plastic pollution in the ecosystem

A. Aquatic Systems

Microplastics are pervasive in marine environments, accounting for a significant portion of marine debris. They originate from land-based sources, such as urban runoff, industrial discharge, and improper waste disposal, and ocean-based sources, including fishing activities and maritime transport. Marine organisms, ranging from zooplankton to large predators, ingest microplastics either directly or indirectly through their prey. Studies have shown that microplastics are present in various parts of marine organisms, including the digestive system, gills, and muscle tissue. This contamination poses risks not only to marine life but also to humans who consume seafood. Oceans act as the final sink for much of the world's plastic waste, with 8 million metric tons entering annually [2]. In the North Pacific Gyre, plastics outnumber plankton by a ratio of 6:1 [3], disrupting food chain dynamics. Mussels from Belgium were found to contain up to 300 particles per 100 g of tissue [4], directly linking seafood to human exposure. Rivers such as the Thames (UK) and Yangtze (China) transport microplastics into oceans, highlighting their role as conduits of pollution.

B. Terrestrial Systems

Soils receive high microplastic loads from sewage sludge, agricultural films, and atmospheric deposition. In Europe, 63,000–430,000 tons of microplastics are added annually through sludge application [5]. In experiments, earthworms (Lumbricus terrestris) exposed to polyethylene fragments reduced burrowing activity and reproduction [6]. In China, degraded plastic mulch films have altered soil fertility and reduced crop productivity, threatening food security.

The use of sewage sludge as fertilizer and plastic mulching in agriculture introduces microplastics into the soil, which can be taken up by crops. Sewage sludge, a byproduct of wastewater treatment, contains microplastics that are not fully removed during the treatment process. When used as fertilizer, these microplastics are introduced into agricultural soils. Studies have shown that microplastics can be absorbed by plants through their roots and translocated to edible parts, thus entering the human food chain. In Germany, the application of sewage sludge on agricultural lands has led to detectable levels of microplastics in soil and crops. A study conducted by the University of Bayreuth found microplastics in various crops, including carrots and lettuce, highlighting the potential for human exposure through plant consumption. Plastic mulching, a common agricultural practice to improve soil moisture and temperature, contributes to soil microplastic contamination. The degradation of mulching films releases microplastics into the environment. Research has demonstrated the presence of microplastics in various crops, raising concerns about food safety.

C. Atmospheric Pathways

Microplastics in the air can settle on crops and water sources, leading to ingestion by animals and humans. These airborne particles originate from various sources, including urban dust, tire wear particles, and synthetic fibers released during the washing of clothes. Urban centers such as Paris record 2,000–11,000 airborne particles/m²/day [7], mainly from textiles and dust. Arctic snow samples also contained microplastics, demonstrating long-range atmospheric transport [8]. Indoor environments are hotspots, with synthetic carpets and clothing releasing fibers that are readily inhaled. Research has indicated that microplastics are ubiquitous in the atmosphere and can be transported over long distances. The deposition of these particles onto agricultural fields and water bodies adds another dimension to the complexity of microplastic contamination in the food chain. Table - 1 provides the details of sources of microplasctics in the different pathways of ecosystem with examples.

TABLE 1: Pathways of Microplastics into Ecosystems

Pathway	Sources	Key Effects on Ecosystem	Examples of Exposure
Aquatic	Plastic waste, fishing gear, runoff	Bioaccumulation, ingestion by marine species	Fish, mollusks, plankton
Terrestrial	Agricultural plastics, sludge, litter	Soil degradation, reduced fertility, ingestion	Earthworms, soil microbes, crops
Atmospheric	Textile fibers, tire wear, dust	Long-distance transport, inhalation risks	Urban populations, remote ecosystems

III. CONSEQUENCES FOR ECOSYSTEMS

The ecological impacts of microplastics are diverse and profound. Biodiversity is particularly threatened, as many organisms ingest microplastics under the mistaken assumption that they are food. In the North Atlantic, over 90 percent of Northern Fulmars (Fulmarus glacialis) have been found to contain plastic debris in their stomachs [9]. Such ingestion can cause internal injuries, reduce feeding efficiency, and impair reproductive success. Similarly, zooplankton exposed to polystyrene particles experience reduced energy intake, compromising their survival and the broader marine food web that relies on them.

Microplastics also alter habitats and ecological processes. In marine sediments, their accumulation reduces porosity and limits oxygen penetration, threatening benthic organisms. In soils, polyester fibers have been shown to disrupt aggregation and reduce the productivity of crops such as lettuce and wheat [10]. Beyond physical impacts, microplastics act as vectors for chemical and biological pollution. Hydrophobic pollutants such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and heavy metals readily adsorb to their surfaces. When ingested by organisms, these pollutants are released into tissues, increasing toxicity. Microplastics also serve as floating substrates for microorganisms, including harmful bacteria like Vibrio, which can spread diseases across marine environments.

IV. HUMAN EXPOSURE TO MICROPLASTICS

Human exposure to microplastics occurs primarily through ingestion, inhalation, and potentially dermal absorption. Food is a significant route of entry, with seafood being particularly contaminated. A study estimated that the average person consumes between 39,000 and 52,000 microplastic particles annually, with higher intake among populations that rely heavily on seafood [11]. Mediterranean fish and shellfish species were found to contain up to 100 microplastic fragments per individual directly linking marine contamination to human diets [12].

Water is another critical pathway. Both bottled and tap water are widely contaminated. A global survey conducted by Orb Media (2017) revealed that 93 percent of bottled water samples contained microplastics, with some brands containing more than 10,000 particles per liter. Inhalation also presents a growing concern. Indoor environments, with their synthetic carpets, textiles, and dust, expose individuals to high levels of airborne microplastics. Adults in one French study were estimated to inhale up to 11 fibers per hour [7]. Emerging evidence now shows microplastics in human tissues, including blood [13], lungs, and placentas [14], indicating their ability to cross biological barriers and raising questions about long-term health consequences.

Although the full scope of human health effects remains under investigation, early findings suggest a range of potential risks. Physically, microplastics can accumulate in tissues and trigger inflammation, oxidative stress, and immune responses. Laboratory studies using human cell cultures demonstrated that polystyrene particles induce cellular stress and apoptosis at high concentrations [15]. Chemically, plastics release additives such as bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates, which are established endocrine disruptors. These compounds have been linked to infertility, obesity, metabolic disorders, and cancers. Furthermore, microplastics carry environmental pollutants, potentially amplifying exposure to harmful chemicals.

Case studies provide additional insight into exposure disparities. Coastal fishing communities in Indonesia and the Philippines, for instance, consume higher levels of seafood and therefore face disproportionately higher microplastic intake compared to inland populations. This raises equity and justice concerns, as vulnerable populations may suffer the most significant health consequences despite contributing minimally to global plastic production. Although the precise long-term effects of microplastic exposure remain uncertain, the parallels with other persistent pollutants, such as PCBs and lead, suggest the potential for widespread and chronic health impacts. Table - 2 provides the details of sources of microplasctics and its impact on the potential helath of the humans.

TABLE 2: Potential Health Impacts of Microplastic Exposure

Exposure Route	**Examples of Sources**	**Potential Health Effects**
Ingestion	Seafood, salt, bottled water	Gut inflammation, microbiome disruption
Inhalation	Airborne fibers, indoor dust	Respiratory irritation, lung inflammation
Absorption	Bloodstream, placenta (via ingestion)	Hormonal disruption, toxin accumulation

Beyond ecological and health impacts, microplastics impose substantial socio-economic costs. The fisheries and aquaculture industries face economic losses due to declining biodiversity and consumer distrust. The European mussel industry, valued at €400 million annually, has already experienced market concerns regarding contamination. Similarly, agriculture is affected as microplastics reduce soil fertility and crop productivity. In Northwest China, residual plastic mulch films have degraded farmland, reducing maize and wheat yields and threatening food security [16].

Healthcare systems also face potential financial burdens. If microplastic exposure is linked to chronic diseases such as cancers or endocrine disorders, healthcare costs could escalate significantly. The European Union already spends an estimated €150 billion annually addressing health impacts associated with endocrine-disrupting chemicals [17]. Cleanup costs are also considerable. The European Commission (2018) estimates that managing plastic pollution already costs between €630 million and €700 million annually [18], and these figures do not account for the added complexity of addressing microplastics, which are far more challenging to remove from the environment due to their size and ubiquity [19].

V. MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Addressing microplastic pollution requires a coordinated approach involving policy, technology, public engagement, and research. On the policy front, several nations have taken notable steps. The United States enacted the Microbead-Free Waters Act (2015), banning microbeads in cosmetics. The European Union introduced the Plastics Directive (2019), targeting single-use plastics and enforcing producer responsibility. Developing nations such as Rwanda and Kenya successfully banned plastic bags, offering models of effective implementation.

Technological innovations provide additional avenues for mitigation. France has mandated the inclusion of microfiber filters in all new washing machines by 2025, aiming to reduce synthetic fiber release. Wastewater treatment plants using advanced filtration technologies can remove up to 99 percent of larger microplastic particles, although nanoplastics still evade capture. Bioplastics made from natural sources such as algae and starch offer promise, though challenges remain in scalability and cost-effectiveness.

Public engagement is equally crucial. Zero-waste movements in Germany and Canada have demonstrated how consumer awareness and grassroots initiatives can drive reductions in single-use plastics. Large-scale projects like The Ocean Cleanup combine technological innovation with public advocacy by removing plastics from rivers and oceans while drawing attention to the issue. Finally, research investment is critical. Long-term cohort studies are essential for understanding the health impacts of microplastics, while international initiatives such as the United Nations' 2022 Global Plastics Treaty emphasize the need for coordinated funding and innovation to address this global challenge.

TABLE 3. Mitigation Approaches for Microplastic Pollution

Level	**Strategy**	**Example Implementation**
Policy	Ban on	EU Plastics

	microbeads, plastic reduction targets	Directive (2019)
Technology	Wastewater filters, biodegradable plastics	France's washing machine filter mandate
Public Action	Reduced consumption, recycling, awareness	Zero-waste movements, The Ocean Cleanup
Research	Toxicity and exposure studies	Long-term cohort health studies

VI. CONCLUSION

Microplastics are pervasive pollutants that infiltrate aquatic, terrestrial, and atmospheric systems, ultimately entering the human body through food, water, and air. While ingestion, inhalation, and dermal exposure are the primary pathways, the full extent of their effects requires more investigation. Their ecological effects include biodiversity loss, habitat disruption, and pollutant transfer. Human exposure is now confirmed, with potential risks ranging from inflammation to endocrine disruption. Socio-economic costs are already significant in fisheries, agriculture, healthcare, and waste management. Addressing this crisis requires coordinated global action through strong policy, technological advances, public engagement, and sustained research. Without immediate action, the journey of microplastics from ecosystems to humans may result in irreversible ecological and health consequences. Comprehensive strategies that involve governments, industries, and individuals are essential to effectively tackle the microplastic problem and protect human health.

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