



4 June 2018 – On 5 June every year, the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations sister agencies and thousands of communities and organizations celebrate World Environment Day. This year, the theme of the Day is “Beat plastic pollution” – a call for action for the world to work together to address one of the great environmental challenges of our time and raise global awareness of the need to reduce the heavy burden of plastic pollution on people’s health and the threat it poses to the environment and wildlife.

While the world has derived great benefit from the use of plastics, which have transformed people’s everyday lives, the negative ecological effects and adverse impact on health from their misuse and overuse cannot be overlooked. Plastic remains in the environment for a long time, it cannot biodegrade, only break down into smaller and smaller pieces.

When plastics decompose they release chemicals that are hazardous to health, the environment and wildlife. Some of the chemicals released when plastic-containing waste is burned are carcinogenic, such as dioxin – the common name for a group of toxic chemicals. Dioxin is toxic to humans and when inhaled through exposure to fumes can accumulate in the human body and be transmitted from mothers to babies via the placenta. Dioxin attached to dust also falls onto waterways and crops.

Plastic accounts for about 10% of all of the waste we generate which is not a surprise when one considers the following:

- Every year the world uses up to 500 billion plastic bags;
- Each year, at least 8 million tons of plastic end up in the oceans – the equivalent of a full garbage truck every minute;
- In the last decade, we produced more plastic than in the whole of the last century;
- 50% of the plastic we use is single use or disposable;
- We buy 1 million plastic bottles every minute.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, about 22% of the burden of disease (increasing to about 30% in children) is attributable to environmental risk factors, including environmental pollution. Causing over 100 communicable and noncommunicable diseases as well as injuries, it is estimated that about 854 000 people die prematurely every year as a result of living or working in unhealthy environments – that is nearly 1 in 5 of total deaths in the Region. These alarming figures are expected to increase unless immediate measures are taken to prevent pollution, alter people’s lifestyles and control unsustainable production and consumption.

World Environment Day 2018 aims at catalysing governments, industry, communities and individuals to come together to combat plastic pollution and explore sustainable alternatives. Invading our oceans and marine environment, damaging ecological systems and threatening human health, we urgently need to reduce the production and excessive use of plastic, in particular the use of single-use plastic.

Since it began in 1972, as a UN Environment-led global event, World Environment Day has become a platform for public outreach and the single largest celebration of our environment each year.

Related link

[Beat pollution: Sign the pledge](#)

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