

## BRIEFING

# Health leaders speak out against pesticide pollution in Europe

October 2022

Health leaders across Europe are calling for urgent measures to reduce exposure to harmful pesticides following their participation in the citizens' science project the Pesticide-CheckUp. Results of the project, in which 300 people from 15 European countries participated, show that frequently used yet potentially health-harming pesticides were found in the hair of nearly every third person tested [1, 2].

Between May and August 2022, 300 people from across Europe participated in the project to get their hair tested for residues of 30 pesticides, just a small fraction (6.6%) of the total number of 455 pesticide-active substances currently authorised in the EU [3]. About half of the selected pesticides are known to have hazardous properties that are suspected to contribute to the development of cancer, harm reproductive health and the development of the unborn child, among others. Scientific evidence suggests roughly one-third of the selected pesticides are known or suspected endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) [4].

The Pesticide-CheckUp project was organised by the civil society alliance Good Food Good Farming (GFGF), with the support of the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and 10 national partner organisations.

## Main findings

- Results of the survey, in which 300 people from 15 European countries took part in, reveal that frequently used yet potentially health-harming pesticides were found in the hair of nearly every third person tested (29%).
- Across all hair samples, 25 of the 30 tested pesticides were detected (80%).
- The fungicide tebuconazole was found in 7.3% of the samples, and was the second most frequently detected pesticide tested. This substance is suspected to be toxic to reproduction and contribute to the development of liver cancer, and may also disrupt the proper functioning of the endocrine system [5].

---

### For more information:

Ivonne Leenen

[ivonne@env-health.org](mailto:ivonne@env-health.org)[www.env-health.org](http://www.env-health.org)

- Pesticides were more frequently detected in hair samples of people that indicated they work on a farm (43.5%). This suggests that farmers and farm workers are most exposed to pesticides, increasing their risks to the negative health impacts of such substances.
- In relation to people's residence, the pesticides tested were more frequently found in the hair of people that live in rural areas (39.5%), followed by those who live in towns (25.9%) and people living in cities (21.8%).
- The average pesticide concentration (quantity) in samples of participants who indicated to eat mostly organic food was up to 23 times lower than in those of people that indicated to eat organic only sometimes or not at all.

About half of all food sold on the EU market are contaminated with residues of at least one pesticide (45.6% in 2020). Yet certain food products can contain pesticide residues in much higher percentages, such as cherries (80%) and lettuce (73%) [6].

The HBM4EU initiative, which was formed to generate evidence of the actual exposure of citizens to chemicals and their possible health effects in order to support policy-making, found that the potential health impacts of exposure to pesticides have not been sufficiently investigated [7].

Recent studies also show that existing measures to reduce pesticide pollution originating from agricultural fields are not effective enough to avoid contamination of nearby children's playgrounds and schoolyards [8]. Citizens' science projects like the Pesticide-CheckUp allow citizens to take action and help raise awareness on how synthetic pesticides can impact our health.

The results of the Pesticide-CheckUp are timely as they feed into the ongoing discussions in the European Parliament and Council on the European Commission's proposal for a sustainable use of pesticides regulation, which is an opportunity for Europe to prioritise health and implement strict and legally binding targets to reduce pesticide use across all EU member states [9].

## Testimonies from the health community:

HEAL has long called for strong EU-wide reduction measures against harmful pesticides, in order to protect those most affected by their negative health impacts. This is why we invited several of our members and partners, all of which prominent health advocates, to participate in the Pesticide-CheckUp.

The following testimonies show how the health community is speaking out against pesticide pollution across Europe, underlining the urgent need to protect people's health against exposure.



**Génon K. Jensen, Executive Director at the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)**

"These results suggest that no matter our profession, place of residence or eating habits, residues of health-harming pesticides can still end up in our hair. The only way to truly safeguard people's health, especially that of vulnerable groups, is by introducing a health-first, pesticide-free Europe."



**Peter van den Hazel, HEAL President and International Coordinator of the International Network for Children's Health, Environment and Safety (INCHES)**

"People should be much more aware of the kind of exposures they are facing on a daily basis. Being exposed to harmful pollutants at a young age, such as pesticides, can lead to many adverse impacts later in life.

At INCHES, we are very concerned about the results of the Pesticide-CheckUp. Children are much more vulnerable to the negative health effects of chemical exposure, and it is critical that we urgently reduce these kinds of exposures.

Better testing of our food products, further research on the (neuro)toxicity of chemical compounds, and more stringent regulation on the production and application of pesticides should be organised by the European Commission and national governments."



**Jessica Carreño Louro, Project Manager at the International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM) and member of the HEAL Executive Committee**

"As a mother, I have always been deeply concerned about the harmful substances my daughter is exposed to on a daily basis. When it comes to pesticides, one might think that making sure that your kid has a healthy and balanced diet based on organic food is enough, when it clearly isn't.

Living close to crop fields myself, I am not surprised that pesticides were more frequently found in hair samples of people that live in rural areas. Raising awareness of general populations on domestic use of substances or on healthy eating and the effects of pesticides is not enough. This responsibility should not lie with citizens, as such an approach exacerbates inequities and puts vulnerable groups particularly at risk. More importantly, it takes the problem away from its real source: industry. I believe the results of the test underline the need for a strict regulation of pesticides and a ban on the most harmful substances. It is time to take the necessary measures for the sound management of pesticides and the efficient protection of people's health from their harmful effects.

As not-for-profit healthcare payers, AIM's members have a double responsibility: protect public health, while ensuring the sustainability of healthcare systems. Exposure to hazardous chemicals is a threat to both. There are no doubts on the links between this exposure and serious health conditions such as allergies, asthma, reproductive problems, neurodevelopmental disorders, adult and childhood obesity, gestational diabetes, and cancers such as breast or kidney, to list a few. On top of that, it is estimated that the health costs arising from exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals amount to at least 163 billion Euro per year in Europe alone. For AIM, limiting exposure to pesticides thus represents a double win. It would bring considerable public health gains, but it is also an economic opportunity and would contribute to ensuring the sustainability of our public health systems.

Therefore, AIM believes that the EU needs more ambitious pesticide reduction targets to protect health. The proposed regulation on the sustainable use of plant protection products should set out truly ambitious targets. It is crucial that Europe upholds the European Green Deal's promises to toxic-free living and zero pollution. The foreseen revisions of REACH and CLP also present a unique chance to ensure a better protection for EU citizens, particularly for the most vulnerable populations. We call on the European Commission to stick to its ambitions and to the promises made in the Green Deal and Zero-Pollution Action Plan, and to continue being a global leader in sustainable chemical management."



**Xavier Brenez, CEO of Mutualités Libres / Onafhankelijke Ziekenfondsen**

"I was not only surprised, but also impressed by the results of the Pesticide-CheckUp campaign: pesticides were found in the hair of nearly every third person that participated. This should be a wake-up call for policy-makers to take action to reduce the use of and exposure to health-harming pesticides. I would hope they also want to protect the health of their own kids or grandchildren.

Reducing the impact of pollution of the environment on our health has been a priority for Mutualités Libres since several years. We have been working on endocrine disrupting chemicals and air pollution. I didn't have to think long to decide to join this campaign on pesticides.

Belgium joined other European member states in asking the EU to review the REACH regulation, in order to increase the level of protection of human health and the environment, and to facilitate the transition to safer alternatives as described in the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability. I hope Europe takes into account this clear signal.

On national level, the use of glyphosate by citizens is forbidden since 2018, but it can still be used in the agricultural sector. That doesn't look very coherent to me."



**Tania Pacheff, President of Cantine Sans Plastique France**

"Living in the metropole of Paris, I pay close attention to the ways I can reduce my family's exposure to pollution and toxic pesticides. For example, I buy organic food, filter my tap water, and try to monitor the indoor air quality in my home. It is therefore worrying to learn about the results of the Pesticide-CheckUp project, which shows us that no matter our place of residence or eating habits, residues of harmful chemicals can still end up in our bodies.

As President of Cantine Sans Plastique France, an organisation bringing together parents and students that are worried about the health risks associated with the use of plastics and other chemicals in our schools, I am especially concerned about the additional health burden harmful pesticides are placing on our children, without people's knowledge. This is why we are joining other health groups across Europe to call on the European Commission and governments to protect our health by introducing a pesticide-free Europe."



### **Roberto Romizi, MD, President of the International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE) Italy**

“Citizens’ science projects like the Pesticide-CheckUp allow us to actively involve and raise awareness among European citizens and decision-makers on the pervasiveness of pesticide pollution, and the health risks that have been connected to exposure to such substances.

Sadly, I was not surprised to learn about the results of this hair testing campaign. We know that health-harming chemicals and pesticides are ubiquitous in our everyday lives. Projects like the Pesticide-CheckUp show that taking steps to limit our own exposure, like switching to an organic diet or paying extra attention to the type of products we buy, may not be enough to protect our health.

The International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE) is an environmental NGO of medical doctors. Our main purpose is to help defend our environment, both locally and globally, to prevent numerous illnesses and improve the quality of life of our patients. In order to safeguard the health of our own generation and of futures ones, we must care for the environment.

Pesticides and herbicides that harm human health should be removed from EU markets without delay. The use of health-harming pesticides, like the widely-used herbicide glyphosate, should be banned immediately. We also look at the European Commission to support a strong Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that prioritises dynamic, sustainable and organic agriculture.”



### **Sandra Jen, EDC-Free Europe campaign coordinator**

“It is shocking to see that residues of potentially health-harming pesticides have been found in the hair of nearly every third person that took part in the Pesticide-CheckUp project. This is an illustration of the harmful mixtures of chemicals, including endocrine disrupting chemicals to which we are all unwillingly exposed to on a daily basis.

The planned overhaul of EU chemicals legislation, promised by the European Commission as part of the European Green Deal, is crucial to protect our health from harmful chemicals and to ensure our right to a non-toxic environment is respected. The upcoming EU regulation on the reduction of pesticide use must be substantially strengthened in order to achieve this goal.”



### **Susana Paixão, President of the Portuguese Society of Environmental Health**

“Results of the Pesticide-CheckUp show us that frequently used yet potentially health-harming pesticides were found in the hair of nearly every third person. It is worrying to learn that despite eating local and seasonal produce, substances that may be harmful to our health can still end up in our bodies.

We must take a stand and call on the European Commission and our national governments to stop our daily exposure to toxic chemicals, by banning their use across Europe without delay.”

## NOTES

1. The full report is available from [https://www.goodfoodgoodfarming.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Pesticide-CheckUp-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.goodfoodgoodfarming.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Pesticide-CheckUp-Report_FINAL.pdf)
2. <https://www.goodfoodgoodfarming.eu/pesticide-checkup/>
3. The 300 samples analysed came from 15 different countries: Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Spain, Poland, Switzerland, Portugal, Latvia, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands.
4. See for example: TedX and HEAL, Everyday exposures to EDCs contribute to modern health epidemics <https://www.env-health.org/infographic-low-doses-matter/>
5. <https://www.pan-europe.info/tebuconazole>
6. EFSA's official journal reports include: The 2020 European Union report on pesticide residues in food <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2022.7215> ; The 2019 European Union report on pesticide residues in food <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2021.6491>
7. <https://www.hbm4eu.eu/>
8. <https://www.env-health.org/current-pesticide-reduction-measures-fail-to-protect-vulnerable-groups-from-pesticide-pollution-new-study-from-italy-shows/>
9. <https://www.env-health.org/health-groups-welcome-europes-plan-to-reduce-pesticide-dependency-but-demand-stronger-protection-measures/>

## Other HEAL resources on pesticides and health:

- Infographic: FIGO, UCSF and HEAL share 10 tips to avoid toxic chemicals during and after pregnancy (available in English, German, French and Spanish)
- Infographic: HEAL and the European Cancer Leagues (ECL) on how Europe can prevent cancer by tackling environmental pollutants
- Infographic: Europe needs to ban glyphosate to protect farmers, our health and the environment (available in English, French, Italian, German and Spanish)
- Infographic: Mutualités Libres and HEAL share 10 tips to avoid endocrine disruptors in and around your home (available in English, French and Dutch)
- Infographic: HEAL and TEDX explain why low doses matter when talking about endocrine disrupting chemicals
- Infographic: Ban the toxic pesticide chlorpyrifos from our plates
- Campaign page: Why the EU needs to ban glyphosate to protect health

## Ivonne Leenen

Senior Communications Officer

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

E-mail: [ivonne@env-health.org](mailto:ivonne@env-health.org)

## Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

Avenue des Arts 7/8

1210 Brussels, Belgium

Phone: +32 (0)2 329 00 80

E-mail: [info@env-health.org](mailto:info@env-health.org)



[@HealthandEnv](https://twitter.com/HealthandEnv)



[@healthandenvironmentalliance](https://www.facebook.com/healthandenvironmentalliance)



The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is the leading not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond. HEAL works to shape laws and policies that promote planetary and human health and protect those most affected by pollution, and raise awareness on the benefits of environmental action for health.

HEAL's over 90 member organisations include international, European, national and local groups of health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts representing over 200 million people across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region.

As an alliance, HEAL brings independent and expert evidence from the health community to EU and global decision-making processes to inspire disease prevention and to promote a toxic-free, low-carbon, fair and healthy future.



HEAL gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the European Union (EU) for the production of this publication. The responsibility for the content lies with the authors and the views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU institutions and funders. The European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) and the funders are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained in this publication.

HEAL's EU Transparency Register Number: 00723343929-96