

# Environment and health: the European Action Plan 2004-2010

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**PURPOSE** : to present a Commission Report on "The European Environment and Health Action Plan 2004-2010."

**CONTENT** : this Report was prepared by the Commission in June 2004, representing its contribution to the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, organised by the WHO in Budapest. The Report acts as a policy document in which the Commission's strategic views on the environment and health problems are outlined. Specifically, the Report sets out a list of Action Plans, which the EU will implement over the coming years in order to try and curb the growth in environmental health related problems as well as to increase the EU's knowledge of how environmental pollutants may aggravate health difficulties amongst the wider European population. The Commission's proposed Strategy puts special emphasis on children given that they face greater exposure to environmental pollutants than adults.

Concretely speaking, the Report proposes that, in future, focus should be given to research which examines a possible causal link between the environment and health concerns. The results of such research could, in turn, be fed into the policy-making process. The added value of such focused research would be the development of a Community system integrating information on the state of the environment, the ecosystem and human health. Such an approach would render assessment of the overall environmental impact on human health more efficient by taking into account what effect a cocktail of pollutants has on human health, a combined exposure of pollutants and lastly what cumulative effects the environment can play on human health. The Strategy, proposed by the Commission, is to set out a long-term approach, which will be implemented in cycles, gradually expanding its coverage as the knowledge base improves.

In order to implement the new Strategy the Commission has defined a number of Actions with an initial starting period of 2004 lasting until 2010. Essentially speaking, the proposed Action Plan has been designed to give the EU the scientifically grounded information needed to help all 25 EU Member States reduce the adverse health impacts of certain environmental factors and to endorse better co-operation between actors in the environment, health and research fields. The three main themes of the Action Plan centre on:

- Improving the information chain in order to understand the links between sources of pollution and health effects.
- Filling the knowledge gap by strengthening research and addressing the emerging issues on environment and health.
- Reviewing policies and improving communications.

As a first step, the plan is to assess the contribution that environmental factors make to health problems. This involves completing the knowledge and information chain. Secondly, the Action Plan seeks to reinforce the scientific research efforts regarding causal links between environmental factors and human health through the EU Research Framework Programme. Based on the conclusions of any such research the EU can then begin to formulate appropriate policy options.

Illnesses to be given particular attention under the Action Plan include respiratory diseases, neuro-developmental disorders, cancers and endocrine disrupting effects. The Action Plan will set up targeted research actions to improve and refine our knowledge of the pollutants linking health to the environment. Another areas to be given special attention is food and the factors most linked to the occurrence of diseases related to food. The data collection and monitoring systems used to examine PCB's, heavy metals and endocrine disrupters will be adopted by the Action Play to assess exposure levels not only to the pilot substances but to all of the principal environmental factors associated with health problems.