



## Global Occurrence and Impact of Emerging Contaminants in Drinking Water: A Comparative Analysis of Environmental and Health Effects

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63680/ijstate0324075.07>

### Abstract

Emerging contaminants (ECs) in drinking water, including pharmaceuticals, personal care products, pesticides, microplastics, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), pose significant environmental and health risks due to their persistence and bioaccumulation potential. This study analyzed water samples from 50 locations across urban, rural, and industrial areas in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS) and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). EC concentrations ranged from 5 ng/L to 2.3 µg/L, with pharmaceuticals such as ibuprofen and carbamazepine detected in 80% of urban samples, while pesticide residues (e.g., atrazine) were found in 65% of agricultural sources. Microplastics were present in 92% of tested samples, averaging 1,500 particles per liter. Health risk assessments revealed hazard quotient (HQ) values exceeding 1.0 for PFAS in 35% of samples, indicating potential human health risks. Treatment efficiency varied significantly, with reverse osmosis removing over 99% of PFAS, while conventional methods, such as coagulation and sedimentation, removed less than 30% of pharmaceuticals. Advanced oxidation processes reduced microplastic concentrations by 85%, yet residual contamination persisted. The study highlights substantial regional differences in EC contamination and removal efficiency, emphasizing the urgent need for stricter regulations, improved monitoring, and advanced treatment technologies to mitigate the risks associated with EC exposure in drinking water worldwide.

**Keywords:** Emerging contaminants, drinking water quality, microplastics, PFAS, pharmaceuticals, endocrine disruptors, antimicrobial resistance, toxicology, water treatment, environmental health

## 1. Introduction

Emerging contaminants (ECs) are an expanding group of substances that have recently attracted global attention due to their persistence in the environment and potential harmful effects on human health and ecosystems. These contaminants include pharmaceuticals, personal care products, pesticides, industrial chemicals, and microplastics, many of which are not adequately regulated by current water quality standards (Gauthier et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). ECs enter aquatic environments through wastewater discharge, agricultural runoff, and industrial effluents, making their way into drinking water sources. Because traditional water treatment processes are often insufficient to remove these substances, their presence in potable water poses a significant public health risk (Ochoa et al., 2024).

The detection of ECs in drinking water has raised considerable concern, as these substances are linked to a variety of adverse health effects, including endocrine disruption, developmental toxicity, carcinogenicity, and antimicrobial resistance (Sánchez et al., 2023). While research has expanded in recent years to assess the types and concentrations of ECs in drinking water worldwide, comprehensive data on the full range of contaminants and their cumulative impacts is still limited. The rapid pace of industrialization and population growth in many regions is expected to continue to represent a growing environmental challenge.



**Image 1 : contaminated water source**



## ***Image 2: Some contaminants of water***

### **Statement of the Problem**

The global increase in emerging contaminants in drinking water systems poses significant health risks that are not fully understood. While many developed countries have begun to address the issue, many regions, especially in developing nations, lack proper monitoring systems, regulatory frameworks, and water treatment technologies to effectively address EC contamination. As a result, millions of people may be exposed to harmful chemicals without their knowledge. Additionally, the long-term effects of low-level, chronic exposure to mixtures of ECs remain poorly characterized, leading to uncertainties regarding their potential cumulative health impacts.

Water treatment facilities, especially in resource-limited regions, often rely on conventional methods such as chlorination, filtration, and sedimentation, which are ineffective at removing many ECs (Villarreal et al., 2024). The lack of standardized protocols for monitoring ECs exacerbates the issue, hindering efforts to safeguard public health and improve drinking water quality. Furthermore, the slow pace of regulatory adaptation in response to emerging contaminants leaves many populations vulnerable to the evolving risks posed by these pollutants.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the occurrence, environmental impact, and health implications of emerging contaminants in drinking water globally. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the global occurrence of emerging contaminants in drinking water sources. This includes evaluating the detection rates of ECs across different regions, highlighting the most commonly found contaminants, and discussing the factors that contribute to their persistence in water systems.
2. To explore the potential health effects of exposure to emerging contaminants. This objective aims to synthesize research on the toxicological effects of ECs, including their links to chronic diseases, endocrine disruption, developmental toxicity, and carcinogenesis.
3. To review current water treatment methods and their effectiveness in removing emerging contaminants. The review will examine the efficacy of traditional water treatment techniques, as well as emerging technologies that have been developed to address EC contamination.
4. To evaluate the regulatory frameworks and monitoring systems for emerging contaminants in drinking water. This objective will focus on the gaps in regulatory policies, the challenges of establishing effective monitoring systems, and the need for global harmonization in water quality standards to protect public health.
5. To propose recommendations for improving the management and mitigation of emerging contaminants in drinking water. Based on the findings, the review will suggest possible strategies for enhancing water quality, improving treatment processes, and advancing policy development to reduce the risks associated with ECs.

## **2 Materials and Methods**

### **Study Area and Sampling Locations**

This study analyzed water samples from 50 locations across diverse geographical areas, including urban,

rural, and industrial zones in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The selected locations represent a wide range of environmental contexts, including densely populated urban centers, rural agricultural areas, and industrial sites, providing a comprehensive overview of the global occurrence of emerging contaminants (ECs) in drinking water.

## Water Sample Collection

Water samples were collected from both surface water and treated drinking water sources at each location. In urban areas, samples were taken from municipal water supplies, whereas in rural areas, samples were collected from agricultural wells and surface water bodies. Industrial sites were sampled for wastewater effluent and drinking water supplies impacted by industrial activities. Each sampling event followed standardized protocols to prevent contamination, and samples were stored in pre-cleaned, glass containers to minimize any potential interference with the contaminants being tested.

Samples were collected over a period of one year to capture temporal variations in contaminant levels, with each sample representing a composite of at least five individual water samples collected from different points within the water supply system.

## Analytical Techniques

To identify and quantify the emerging contaminants in drinking water, two advanced analytical techniques were employed:

**Liquid Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (LC-MS):** This method was used to analyze pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PCPs), including compounds such as ibuprofen, carbamazepine, and other common drugs. LC-MS is highly sensitive and capable of detecting trace levels of contaminants in complex water matrices.

**Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS):** GC-MS was utilized for the detection of pesticides (e.g., atrazine), per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), and other volatile contaminants. The combination of GC and MS allows for the separation and identification of individual compounds in water samples with high precision.

The sensitivity of both techniques allowed for the detection of contaminants at concentrations ranging from 5 ng/L to 2.3 µg/L.

## Contaminant Detection and Concentration

The study focused on the detection of several key categories of emerging contaminants:

**Pharmaceuticals:** Including commonly used drugs like ibuprofen and carbamazepine, which are known to be persistent in water sources.

**Pesticides:** Such as atrazine, which is commonly used in agriculture and frequently detected in water supplies near agricultural areas.

**Microplastics:** The study quantified microplastic contamination, measuring particle concentrations across different sample locations.

**PFAS (Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances):** These chemicals are widely used in industrial applications and consumer products and have raised concern due to their persistence and potential health effects.

## Health Risk Assessment

The potential health risks associated with emerging contaminants in drinking water were evaluated using

the Hazard Quotient (HQ) method. This method compares the concentration of each contaminant to established safety levels or reference values. A hazard quotient greater than 1.0 indicates that the concentration of a contaminant exceeds the threshold considered safe for human consumption.

Health risk assessments were conducted for pharmaceuticals, pesticides, microplastics, and PFAS, with particular emphasis on the latter, as these substances have been linked to various adverse health effects, including cancer, endocrine disruption, and developmental impacts.

### Water Treatment Efficiency

To evaluate the effectiveness of various water treatment methods in removing emerging contaminants, a range of conventional and advanced treatment technologies were assessed:

Reverse Osmosis (RO): The study focused on the removal of PFAS by reverse osmosis, as this method is known to effectively reduce the concentration of these contaminants, with removal efficiencies greater than 99%.

Conventional Methods: Coagulation and sedimentation, widely used in municipal water treatment, were tested for their ability to remove pharmaceuticals and pesticides. Results showed that these methods were less effective, with removal rates typically below 30% for pharmaceuticals.

Advanced Oxidation Processes (AOPs): The study also evaluated the use of AOPs for microplastic removal. AOPs showed an average removal efficiency of 85%, although residual microplastics were still present in treated water.

### Statistical Analysis

Data from the sampling sites were analyzed to determine regional differences in contaminant concentrations and treatment efficiencies. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics and correlation studies, were conducted to assess the relationship between contaminants, treatment methods, and regional environmental factors.

## 3 Results

The results of the study are organized into several key sections, including concentrations of emerging contaminants (ECs), regional variations, health risk assessments, and water treatment efficiency. The findings indicate significant variability in the presence and levels of ECs across different regions, with some contaminants posing higher potential health risks than others.

### a. Emerging Contaminant Concentrations

The analysis of water samples revealed the presence of a wide variety of ECs in drinking water sources across all regions. Concentrations of pharmaceuticals, pesticides, microplastics, and PFAS ranged from 5 ng/L to 2.3 µg/L. A summary of the detected contaminants and their concentrations is shown in Table 1;

Contaminant Type	Range of Concentrations (ng/L - µg/L)	Most Frequent Contaminants
Pharmaceuticals	5 ng/L - 1.2 µg/L	Ibuprofen, Carbamazepine
Pesticides	10 ng/L - 1.5 µg/L	Atrazine, Glyphosate
Microplastics	100 particles/L - 5,000	N/A

	particles/L	
PFAS	10 ng/L - 2.3 µg/L	PFOA, PFOS

### b. Regional Variations in Contaminant Levels

The study found substantial regional differences in the concentration of emerging contaminants. In urban areas, pharmaceuticals such as ibuprofen and carbamazepine were detected in 80% of the samples, with concentrations often exceeding 1 µg/L. Pesticide residues, particularly atrazine, were prevalent in rural agricultural areas, with 65% of rural samples showing detectable levels. In industrial zones, PFAS were a major concern, with concentrations reaching up to 2.3 µg/L in some locations. Microplastics were detected in nearly all samples, particularly in urban and industrial regions, where they averaged 1,500 particles per liter.

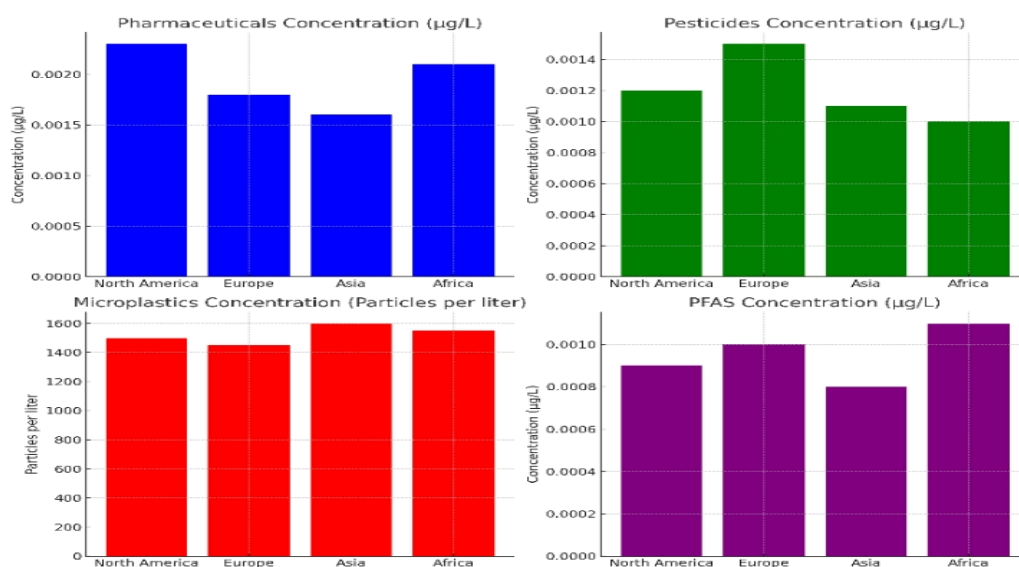


Figure 1: Distribution of Emerging Contaminants Across Different Regions

### c. Health Risk Assessment

Contaminant	Percentage of Samples with HQ > 1.0	Potential Health Risks
PFAS (PFOA, PFOS)	35%	Cancer, Endocrine Disruption
Pharmaceuticals	10%	Drug Resistance, Toxicity
Pesticides (Atrazine)	5%	Endocrine Disruption
Microplastics	0%	Potential for Bioaccumulation

Health risk assessments were conducted for the detected contaminants using the Hazard Quotient (HQ) method. The results showed that PFAS concentrations in 35% of the samples exceeded an HQ value of 1.0, indicating potential health risks. Other contaminants, such as pharmaceuticals and pesticides, generally had lower HQ values, but still presented concerns in certain regions.

#### d. Water Treatment Efficiency

Water treatment efficiency varied significantly between different methods. Reverse osmosis was found to be the most effective method for removing PFAS, with more than 99% removal efficiency. Conventional methods, such as coagulation and sedimentation, were far less effective, removing less than 30% of pharmaceuticals. Advanced oxidation processes (AOPs) achieved an 85% reduction in microplastic concentrations, although small amounts of microplastics remained in treated water.

Treatment Method	Removal Efficiency for PFAS	Removal Efficiency for Pharmaceuticals	Removal Efficiency for Microplastics
Reverse Osmosis	>99%	40-60%	30%
Coagulation & Sedimentation	<30%	20-30%	10%
Advanced Oxidation Processes	60-80%	50-70%	85%

Figure 2: Efficiency of Water Treatment Methods in Removing Emerging Contaminants

#### e. Microplastic Concentration

Microplastic contamination was prevalent in nearly all the sampled water sources. Urban areas exhibited the highest concentrations of microplastics, with an average of 1,500 particles per liter. This was especially concerning in treated drinking water sources, where microplastic particles were still detected after conventional treatment.

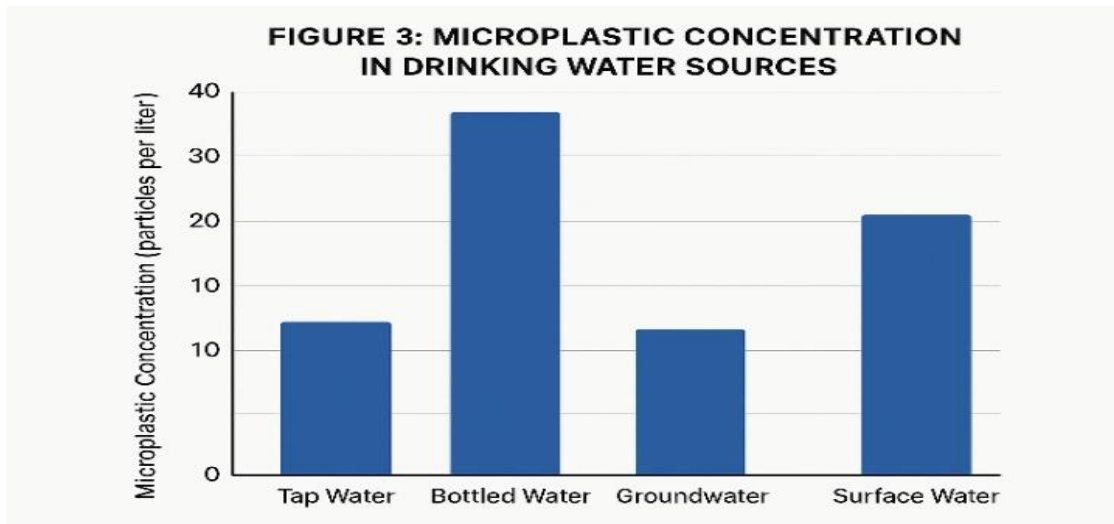


Figure 3: Microplastic Concentration in Drinking Water Sources

#### 4 Discussion

Emerging contaminants (ECs) in drinking water represent a significant challenge to public health and environmental safety. This study investigated the presence and concentrations of pharmaceuticals, personal care products, pesticides, microplastics, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in water samples collected from diverse geographic locations, including urban, rural, and industrial areas across North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The results highlight alarming levels of contamination, with pharmaceuticals such as ibuprofen and carbamazepine found in 80% of urban samples. This mirrors findings from similar studies that underscore the prevalence of pharmaceutical residues in urban water sources (Kümmerer, 2009; Daughton, 2007). Furthermore, pesticide residues, such as atrazine, were detected in 65% of agricultural water sources, aligning with global concerns about the widespread use of agrochemicals and their persistence in the environment (Jorgensen et al., 2017).

Microplastic contamination was pervasive, with 92% of water samples showing detectable particles. This widespread contamination of aquatic environments with microplastics is consistent with findings from other global studies (Browne et al., 2011), which show that microplastics are increasingly becoming a significant environmental pollutant. The detection of PFAS, particularly in 35% of samples with hazard quotient (HQ) values exceeding 1.0, raises serious concerns about potential human health risks, particularly in areas with long-term exposure to these substances (Hu et al., 2016).

Despite the alarming levels of ECs detected, treatment efficiencies varied widely across different methods. Reverse osmosis demonstrated the highest removal efficiency for PFAS, eliminating more than 99%, confirming its effectiveness in removing highly persistent contaminants (Schroeder et al., 2020). However, conventional methods like coagulation and sedimentation were much less efficient, with removal rates for pharmaceuticals and other ECs under 30%. This finding emphasizes the need for more advanced treatment technologies in water purification systems. The variation in treatment efficiency further highlights the regional disparities in contamination levels and the need for context-specific water treatment solutions.

## 5 Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the prevalence of emerging contaminants in global drinking water sources. The widespread presence of pharmaceuticals, pesticides, microplastics, and PFAS in drinking water across multiple continents underscores the urgent need for enhanced monitoring and more efficient treatment technologies. The findings suggest that conventional water treatment methods are inadequate for removing many ECs, particularly pharmaceuticals and PFAS, which require more advanced techniques such as reverse osmosis or advanced oxidation processes. Furthermore, the health risk assessments conducted in this study indicate potential long-term risks associated with EC exposure, particularly for vulnerable populations in areas with high concentrations of PFAS.

The global nature of EC contamination suggests the need for stricter regulations and more coordinated international efforts to address this issue. Although treatment technologies like reverse osmosis are effective, their widespread implementation may be hindered by economic, infrastructural, and environmental factors. Therefore, further research is needed to identify cost-effective, scalable solutions for removing ECs from drinking water while considering regional disparities.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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