

ENDOCRINE DISRUPTING CHEMICALS (EDCS) AND THEIR MULTI-SYSTEMIC IMPACT ON HUMAN HEALTH: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Maqbool Ahmed Soomro^{*1}, Parwan Ali Ujjan², Dua Khowaja³, Abdul Wahab Lighari⁴,
Nasreen Naz Shahani⁵, Mahtab Ali Veesar⁶

^{*1,2}Department of Biochemistry, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur.

^{3,4}Department of Physiology, University of Sindh Jamshoro

^{5,6}Department of Zoology, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur.

^{*1}soomromaqbool719@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *

Maqbool Ahmed Soomro

Abstract

Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) comprise a structurally diverse cohort of exogenous compounds that perturb the homeostatic regulation of hormonal signaling pathways. Ubiquitously distributed across industrial applications, consumer plastics, and agricultural effluents, EDCs—including Bisphenol A (BPA), phthalates, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)—represent a critical challenge to global physiological integrity. This review provides a rigorous synthesis of current toxicological and epidemiological evidence, elucidating the complex exposure pathways and multi-modal molecular mechanisms through which these agents operate. Beyond classical nuclear receptor agonism and antagonism (e.g., estrogen and androgen receptors), we examine non-monotonic dose-response curves and the disruption of metabolic regulators, such as peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors (PPARs). Furthermore, we detail the role of EDCs in mediating stable epigenetic modifications, including DNA methylation and histone acetylation, which may facilitate transgenerational inheritance of disease phenotypes. Special emphasis is placed on "windows of susceptibility"—critical developmental periods (prenatal, neonatal, and pubertal) where endocrine interference can irreversibly alter cellular differentiation and organogenesis. These disruptions manifest clinically as a spectrum of multi-systemic pathologies, including reproductive dysfunction, neurodevelopmental impairments, metabolic syndromes, and an increased incidence of hormone-sensitive malignancies. By integrating recent longitudinal cohort data with mechanistic molecular studies, this review highlights the urgent need for refined regulatory frameworks and biomonitoring strategies to mitigate the long-term health trajectories associated with chronic, low-dose EDC exposure.

INTRODUCTION**1.1 Definition and Scope**

The conceptualization of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) has shifted from basic toxicology to a nuanced understanding of biological signal interference. Modern endocrinology defines an EDC as an exogenous agent—either a discrete substance or

a complex mixture—that disrupts the homeostatic, developmental, or reproductive functionality of the endocrine system, subsequently eliciting adverse phenotypic outcomes in the exposed organism, its progeny, or broader subpopulations (Gore et al., 2019). Unlike traditional environmental toxins that

may cause direct cellular necrosis, EDCs operate as "signal disruptors" that hijack the body's internal communication network. These chemicals interfere with the synthesis, secretion, transport, metabolism, binding, and elimination of natural hormones, which are the essential messengers responsible for maintaining homeostasis, regulating growth, and driving reproductive development (Kahn et al., 2020). Recent scientific frameworks have identified ten key characteristics of EDCs, such as their ability to interact with or activate hormone receptors, antagonize receptor sites, alter receptor expression, and induce epigenetic modifications that change how genes respond to hormonal signals (La Merrill et al., 2020).

The scope of EDC prevalence is extraordinarily broad, encompassing both naturally occurring compounds, such as phytoestrogens in soy, and a vast array of synthetic industrial agents. These include plasticizers like Bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS),

polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and various organophosphate pesticides (Flaws et al., 2020). The biological impact of these chemicals is not governed by traditional linear toxicology; instead, EDCs frequently exhibit non-monotonic dose-response (NMDR) curves. This means that extremely low doses—often in the parts per billion or trillion—can trigger significant physiological responses because they mimic the natural potency of endogenous hormones (Vandenberg, 2021). Because hormones are designed to operate at low concentrations, the endocrine system is paradoxically more sensitive to minute levels of EDCs than to higher concentrations that might saturate or down-regulate cellular receptors. Consequently, regulatory thresholds are currently being re-evaluated globally, as seen in the 2023 revision by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which dramatically lowered the tolerable daily intake of BPA based on its impact on the immune system (EFSA, 2023).



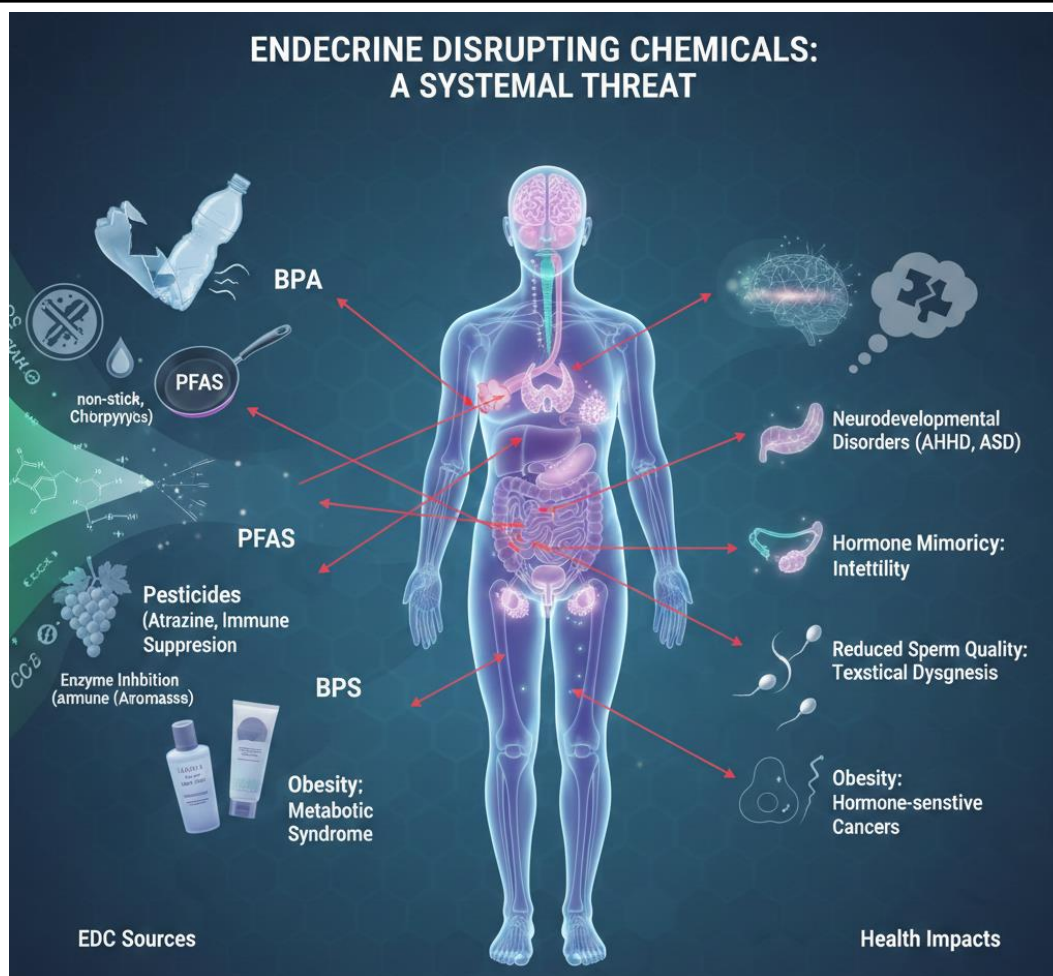


Figure 1. Pathways of Endocrine Disrupting Chemical (EDC) Exposure and Systemic Health Pathologies.

This schematic illustrates common anthropogenic sources of EDCs (e.g., plastics, non-stick cookware, and pesticides) and their multi-organ impact. Key mechanisms include hormone mimicry and enzymatic inhibition, leading to diverse clinical outcomes such as neurodevelopmental disorders, reproductive dysfunction (e.g., testicular dysgenesis), and metabolic syndromes.

1.2 Significance and Global Concern

The significance of studying Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) has escalated into a primary global health priority as the "silent pandemic" of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) continues to rise in parallel with increasing environmental chemical complexity. Recent epidemiological data and longitudinal studies have established a compelling correlation between chronic EDC exposure and the

global surge in metabolic syndromes, infertility, and neurobehavioral disorders (Kahn et al., 2020). Unlike traditional pollutants that exhibit localized effects, EDCs are recognized as systemic disruptors that interfere with the fundamental biological programming of human populations. This has led major international regulatory bodies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), to drastically re-evaluate their safety paradigms. A landmark example of this shift is the 2023 EFSA revision of Bisphenol A (BPA) safety standards, which lowered the tolerable daily intake (TDI) by a factor of 20,000 based on newly identified risks to the immune system, signaling a major departure from previous risk assessment models (EFSA, 2023). The global concern surrounding EDCs is further intensified by the realization that these substances

represent a transgenerational threat. Because many EDCs, such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and phthalates, can readily cross the placental barrier and accumulate in the fetal environment, they infiltrate the "windows of susceptibility" during which organ systems are uniquely vulnerable (Heindel et al., 2022). This developmental interference can result in permanent physiological reprogramming, meaning the health trajectories of offspring are compromised by environmental exposures experienced by the parents. Recent research into the "Developmental Origins of Health and Disease" (DOHaD) suggests that current global epidemics of obesity and Type 2 diabetes are not solely the result of lifestyle choices but are deeply rooted in prenatal exposure to "obesogens" that alter metabolic set-points before birth (Heindel & Blumberg, 2019). This "toxic legacy" necessitates a shift from individual clinical interventions to comprehensive environmental policy changes aimed at protecting the reproductive and developmental health of future generations.

Beyond the clinical impact, the significance of EDC research is underscored by the massive economic and public health burden they impose on global

economies. Recent health-economic assessments indicate that EDC-related illnesses, including lost IQ points from neurotoxins and healthcare costs for hormone-sensitive cancers, cost the European Union and the United States hundreds of billions of dollars annually in lost productivity and medical expenditures (Attina et al., 2019). The environmental persistence of "forever chemicals" like PFAS, which have now been detected in the blood of nearly 98% of the global population, creates a pervasive health risk that traditional waste management and water treatment systems are currently unequipped to handle (DeWitt et al., 2020). Consequently, the study of EDCs is vital not only for medical science but also for the development of "Green Chemistry" and international legal frameworks, such as the EU's Chemical Strategy for Sustainability, which seeks to eliminate the most harmful EDCs from consumer products to safeguard planetary health (Flaws et al., 2020). This global urgency reflects a growing consensus that the preservation of endocrine integrity is a foundational requirement for sustainable human development in the 21st century.

Table 1. Primary EDCs, Sources, and Target Organs

Bisphenols (BPA)	Plastic liners, thermal receipts	Reproductive, Metabolic	Infertility, Diabetes
Phthalates	Cosmetics, Toys, PVC	Male Reproductive	Low sperm count, PCOS
PFAS	Non-stick pans, Drinking water	Thyroid, Immune	Hypothyroidism, Obesity
Parabens	Skin lotions, Shampoos	Endocrine (Estrogen)	Precocious puberty

2. Causes and Pathways of Exposure

2.1 Environmental and Agricultural Sources

The primary environmental burden of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) is intrinsically linked to intensive agricultural practices and the widespread application of agrochemicals. Pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides are meticulously engineered to target biological pathways in pests, yet they frequently exhibit cross-reactivity with the vertebrate endocrine system. Among these, Atrazine remains one of the most scrutinized environmental contaminants due to its ubiquity in global groundwater supplies and its potent interference with steroidogenesis. Research has demonstrated that Atrazine functions as a

powerful inducer of the enzyme aromatase, which catalyzes the conversion of testosterone into estrogen. This specific mechanism has been shown to induce "chemical castration" and complete feminization in male amphibians, a phenomenon that serves as a biological sentinel for potential impacts on human reproductive health (Bernini et al., 2021). Epidemiological studies have recently correlated high environmental concentrations of Atrazine in agricultural runoff with decreased sperm quality and altered menstrual cycles in human populations living in proximity to intensive farming regions (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Beyond Atrazine, the herbicide Glyphosate has emerged as a significant global concern regarding its role as an endocrine disruptor. While initially marketed as safe for humans due to its targeting of the shikimate pathway—which is absent in mammals—recent evidence suggests that Glyphosate and its commercial formulations can disrupt the gut microbiome-endocrine axis. The "second genome" provided by gut microbiota is essential for the metabolism of hormones and the regulation of insulin sensitivity; consequently, Glyphosate-induced dysbiosis has been linked to metabolic disturbances and impaired estrogen signaling (Zhu et al., 2021). Furthermore, many agricultural chemicals are characterized by extreme environmental persistence. Legacy pollutants such as organochlorines (e.g., DDT) and modern persistent agents continue to accumulate in soil and sediment for decades after their application. These lipophilic substances undergo biomagnification, increasing in concentration as they move up the food chain, eventually resulting in significant human body burdens through the consumption of contaminated meat, dairy, and fish (Sun et al., 2022).

The hydrogeological and atmospheric movement of agricultural EDCs facilitates their transport far beyond the point of initial application. Volatile pesticides can undergo "atmospheric distillation," where they evaporate in warmer climates and condense in colder regions, leading to high concentrations in remote areas and indigenous populations who are not directly involved in agriculture. Simultaneously, agricultural runoff leaches these chemicals into groundwater systems, which serve as the primary drinking water source for millions. Recent studies have highlighted the presence of complex "chemical cocktails" in drinking water, where multiple low-dose EDCs act synergistically to produce additive effects that exceed the toxicity of any single agent (Kahn et al., 2020). This environmental ubiquity ensures that exposure is not merely an occupational hazard for farmworkers but a chronic, systemic reality for the general public, mediated through contaminated air, water, and the global food supply.

Table 2. Common Agricultural EDCs and Environmental Fate

Atrazine	Herbicide	Aromatase induction (Estrogen ↑)	High (Groundwater persistent)
Glyphosate	Herbicide	Microbiome disruption; Estrogen signaling	Moderate (Soil binding)
Chlorpyrifos	Insecticide	Thyroid hormone interference	Moderate to High
Vinclozolin	Fungicide	Androgen receptor antagonist	High (Transgenerational effects)

2.2 Industrial and Consumer Products

Industrial and consumer products represent a significant and pervasive source of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs), with exposure occurring through daily contact with household items and food-contact materials. Bisphenol A (BPA) remains one of the most widely produced industrial chemicals globally, primarily utilized in the synthesis of polycarbonate plastics and epoxy resins found in food and beverage container linings. Despite increased regulatory scrutiny, BPA remains dominant in consumer products, including thermal paper receipts and water storage systems. A critical concern in contemporary toxicology is the transition to BPA analogues, such as Bisphenol S (BPS) and

Bisphenol F (BPF). Recent studies indicate that these "BPA-free" alternatives may be equally potent endocrine disruptors, exhibiting similar estrogen-mimicking properties that interfere with cellular signaling and metabolic health—a phenomenon often termed "regrettable substitution" (Peluso et al., 2021). The leaching of these chemicals is accelerated by environmental stressors such as heat, acidity, and repeated use, ensuring a continuous chronic exposure through dietary ingestion and dermal contact.

Complementing the exposure from rigid plastics are phthalates, a class of chemicals used as plasticizers to increase the flexibility and durability of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and as solvents in cosmetics and

personal care products.⁴ Phthalates are structurally distinct from bisphenols but are equally pervasive, often used to stabilize fragrances in lotions, shampoos, and deodorants. Their primary clinical significance lies in their "anti-androgenic" activity; phthalates interfere with the synthesis of testosterone by Leydig cells during critical windows of fetal development. This interference is a major driver of "Phthalate Syndrome" in males, which is characterized by a shortened anogenital distance, undescended testes, and a higher predisposition to reproductive failure in adulthood (Wang et al., 2021). Because phthalates are not chemically bound to the plastic matrix, they leach easily into the surrounding environment, creating a persistent presence in indoor air, medical devices, and settled dust.

Beyond plastics and cosmetics, the indoor environment is heavily contaminated with flame retardants, specifically polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs). These chemicals are integrated into

textiles, upholstery, electronics, and polyurethane foams to meet fire safety standards. PBDEs are lipophilic and persistent, often migrating from products into household dust, which serves as a major exposure route for infants and toddlers through hand-to-mouth activity. The molecular structure of PBDEs shares striking similarities with thyroid hormones, specifically thyroxine (T_4), allowing them to competitively bind to thyroid transport proteins and receptors. This disruption of the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid (HPT) axis is particularly detrimental during brain development, leading to neurodevelopmental delays, cognitive deficits, and behavioral issues later in life (Reddam et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2022). The accumulation of PBDEs in human breast milk and adipose tissue further underscores the long-term biological persistence of these industrial agents and the urgency for more stringent indoor air quality regulations.

Table 3. Industrial and Consumer EDCs: Sources and Mechanisms

Bisphenols	BPA, BPS, BPF	Canned food linings, thermal receipts	Estrogen Receptor (ER α/β) Agonist
Phthalates	DEHP, DBP, DEP	PVC plastics, perfumes, shampoos	Androgen Receptor Antagonist
Flame Retardants	PBDEs	Furniture foam, textiles, electronics	Thyroid Hormone Disruptor
Parabens	Methylparaben, Propylparaben	Cosmetics, skin care, preservatives	Weak Estrogenic Activity

2.3 Dietary Pathways and "Forever Chemicals"

Dietary ingestion represents the most pervasive and significant route of exposure to Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) for the general population, primarily through the consumption of contaminated food and water. Among the most concerning agents in this category are Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), a class of synthetic chemicals engineered for their water- and grease-resistant properties. Frequently termed "forever chemicals" due to the extraordinary strength of the carbon-fluorine bond, PFAS are virtually indestructible in the environment and exhibit a high

degree of bioaccumulation in human tissues. Exposure is predominantly driven by the leaching of PFAS from non-stick cookware coatings (PTFE) and grease-resistant food packaging, such as microwave popcorn bags, fast-food wrappers, and pizza boxes. Once ingested, these chemicals bind to serum proteins like albumin and circulate through the body with half-lives spanning several years, leading to a state of chronic physiological interference (Fenton et al., 2021; Sunderland et al., 2019).

The molecular impact of PFAS exposure is particularly detrimental to metabolic and immunological homeostasis. Recent toxicological

research has demonstrated that PFAS act as potent activators of the Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor alpha (PPAR α), a key regulator of lipid metabolism. This activation disrupts the normal processing of fats, leading to elevated serum cholesterol and triglycerides, even in pediatric populations. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence, including the landmark study by DeWitt et al. (2020), indicates that PFAS exposure is significantly associated with a suppressed immune response. This immunotoxicity is manifested as a reduced production of antibodies in response to routine childhood vaccinations, suggesting that "forever chemicals" can diminish the overall efficacy of public health immunization programs (DeWitt et al., 2020; Grandjean et al., 2022).

Beyond PFAS, the dietary pathway is further complicated by the presence of "legacy" EDCs and modern processed food additives. Polychlorinated

biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxins, though largely banned, persist in the environment and concentrate in the fatty tissues of livestock and fish. When humans consume these high-fat animal products, they ingest concentrated doses of these lipophilic disruptors, which interfere with thyroid hormone signaling and reproductive health. Additionally, the industrial processing of food introduces a secondary layer of risk; many processed foods contain artificial preservatives, colorants, and flavor enhancers that have been identified as putative endocrine disruptors. The synergy between chemical leaching from plastic containers and the inherent chemical load of processed foods creates a "cocktail effect," where the cumulative impact on the endocrine system may be greater than the sum of individual exposures (Kahn et al., 2020; Munoz et al., 2022).

Table 4. Dietary EDCs: Contamination Sources and Health Outcomes

PFAS (PFOA/PFOS)	Non-stick cookware, fast food wrap	PPAR α activation; Immune suppression	Hypercholesterolemia; Vaccine failure
PCBs / Dioxins	Fatty fish, dairy, red meat	Aryl hydrocarbon receptor (AhR) binding	Thyroiditis; Hormone-sensitive cancers
BPA / Phthalates	Plastic containers, canned food	Estrogen mimicry; Anti-androgenic	Infertility; Metabolic syndrome
Organophosphates	Conventionally grown produce	Acetylcholinesterase inhibition	Neurodevelopmental & cognitive delays

3. Molecular Mechanisms of Action

EDCs do not act through a single pathway; rather, they "hack" the endocrine system using several complex molecular strategies:

3.1 Receptor Mimicry and Antagonism

The molecular pathogenicity of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) is primarily defined by their ability to "hack" the body's internal signaling network through receptor mimicry, a process formally known as agonism. Many EDCs possess chemical architectures that are remarkably similar to endogenous steroid hormones, allowing them to bind to and activate nuclear receptors in the absence of the natural ligand. A quintessential example of this is Bisphenol A (BPA), which features a phenolic

ring structure analogous to 17 β -estradiol. This structural mimicry enables BPA to occupy the binding pockets of estrogen receptors alpha (ER α) and beta (ER β). While BPA's binding affinity is lower than that of natural estrogen, its chronic presence in human serum and its ability to bypass protective blood-binding proteins, such as sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), allow it to trigger abnormal cellular proliferation and aberrant gene expression (Santangeli et al., 2019; Peluso et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent research has shifted focus toward non-genomic pathways, showing that EDCs can also activate the membrane-bound G-protein coupled estrogen receptor (GPER), which initiates rapid intracellular signaling cascades that

contribute to acute metabolic and cardiovascular disturbances (Li et al., 2020).

Complementary to mimicry is the mechanism of receptor antagonism, where EDCs bind to hormone receptors but fail to initiate a biological response, effectively functioning as a "receptor blockade." This prevents endogenous hormones from performing their vital regulatory tasks. This mechanism is most prominently seen in anti-androgenic EDCs, such as phthalates and the fungicide vinclozolin. These chemicals competitively inhibit the Androgen Receptor (AR), preventing testosterone and dihydrotestosterone (DHT) from binding. During fetal development, this blockade is particularly catastrophic; it disrupts the androgen-dependent differentiation of the male reproductive system, leading to the clinical manifestations of "Phthalate Syndrome," including reduced anogenital distance and undescended testes (Wang et al., 2021). The antagonistic scope of EDCs is not limited to sex steroids; several chemicals act as thyroid receptor antagonists, blocking the action of thyroxine (T_4) and triiodothyronine (T_3), which are essential for neurodevelopment and basal metabolic rate (Reddam et al., 2020; Kahn et al., 2020).

Recent molecular studies have also highlighted the concept of "receptor promiscuity," where a single EDC can act as an agonist for one receptor while simultaneously functioning as an antagonist for another, creating a state of pervasive hormonal dysregulation. For instance, some EDCs may activate estrogen receptors while blocking thyroid receptors ($TR \alpha$ and $TR \beta$), leading to a complex multi-system failure that traditional single-endpoint toxicological models often overlook (La Merrill et al., 2020). This interference extends to metabolic receptors, specifically the Aryl hydrocarbon Receptor (AhR) and the Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptors (PPARs). Industrial pollutants like dioxins bind to the AhR to disrupt immune-endocrine cross-talk, while "obesogenic" EDCs target PPAR γ to drive the differentiation of stem cells into adipocytes, thereby increasing fat storage capacity (Heindel & Blumberg, 2019; Vinggaard et al., 2021). The cumulative effect of these receptor-level interactions is a profound restructuring of the cellular transcriptional landscape, leading to chronic diseases that emerge long after the initial exposure event.

Table 5. Receptor Interactions and Biological Consequences of Key EDCs

Bisphenols (BPA/BPS)	ER α , ER β , GPER	Agonist (Mimicry)	Abnormal cell growth, PCOS
Phthalates (DEHP)	Androgen Receptor (AR)	Antagonist (Blockade)	Genital malformation, infertility
Flame Retardants	Thyroid Receptor (TR)	Antagonist	IQ reduction, metabolic slowing
Organotins (TBT)	PPAR γ , RXR	Agonist	Adipogenesis (Obesity)
Dioxins / PCBs	AhR	Agonist	Immunotoxicity, cancer

3.2 Epigenetic Reprogramming

One of the most transformative advancements in endocrine research post-2018 is the elucidation of how epigenetic reprogramming serves as a molecular bridge between environmental exposure and chronic disease. Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) possess the unique ability to alter the "epigenetic landscape"—comprising DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNA expression—without changing the actual nucleotide sequence of the DNA. This mechanism allows EDCs to essentially "re-write" the instructions for gene expression, leading to the silencing of tumor

suppressor genes or the over-expression of oncogenes and metabolic regulators. Recent molecular studies have demonstrated that chemicals such as phthalates and Bisphenol A (BPA) can interfere with DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs), the enzymes responsible for maintaining methylation patterns. This interference is particularly potent during gametogenesis and early embryogenesis, periods when the epigenome undergoes massive erasure and re-establishment, making it highly susceptible to chemical "imprinting" (Santangeli et al., 2019; Heindel et al., 2022).

The significance of these epigenetic changes lies in their stability and persistence, often manifesting as a "molecular memory" of early-life exposure. This phenomenon is a cornerstone of the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease (DOHaD) hypothesis, suggesting that exposure to EDCs in utero can program a fetus to develop obesity, metabolic syndrome, or hormone-sensitive cancers decades later in adulthood. For example, prenatal exposure to certain pesticides and plasticizers has been shown to alter the methylation of genes associated with adipogenesis and glucose metabolism, predisposing the individual to an "obesogenic" phenotype regardless of adult caloric intake (Heindel & Blumberg, 2019). Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that these epigenetic alterations can be transgenerational; changes induced in the germline of the exposed individual (F1 generation) can be passed down to the F2 and even F3 generations, potentially impacting the health of great-grandchildren who were never directly exposed to the original chemical insult (Santangeli et al., 2019; Walker & Gore, 2021).

Beyond DNA methylation, EDCs significantly impact histone modifications and the expression of microRNAs (miRNAs), which act as "volume knobs" for protein synthesis. Research post-2020 has highlighted how PFAS and heavy metals can alter histone acetylation, leading to a more "open" chromatin structure that allows for the inappropriate transcription of genes involved in inflammatory responses and oxidative stress. Additionally, EDC-induced changes in miRNA profiles have been linked to impaired placental function and neurodevelopmental delays, as these small RNA molecules are critical for regulating the timing of neuronal migration and differentiation in the fetal brain (Kahn et al., 2020; Radke et al., 2021). This multi-layered epigenetic disruption creates a complex pathological state that traditional genetic testing cannot detect, emphasizing the need for "epigenetic biomarkers" in clinical diagnostics to identify individuals at high risk for EDC-related diseases before clinical symptoms appear.

Table 6. Epigenetic Mechanisms and Long-term Health Outcomes of Key EDCs

BPA / BPS	DNA Hyper/Hypomethylation	ESR1, HOXA10	Infertility, Breast Cancer
Phthalates	Histone Modification	IGF2, PPAR	Obesity, Metabolic Syndrome
Vinclozolin	Germline Methylation	Reproductive Signaling	Transgenerational Infertility
PFAS	MicroRNA Alteration	Lipid Metabolism	Hyperlipidemia, Liver Stress

3.3 Enzymatic Interference

Beyond direct receptor interactions, Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) exert profound pathological effects by targeting the catalytic activity of enzymes essential for hormone biosynthesis and metabolism. This mechanism, known as enzymatic interference, disrupts the delicate equilibrium of endogenous signaling molecules, often leading to a systemic shift in the hormonal landscape. A primary target in this regard is aromatase (CYP19A1), a critical enzyme responsible for the irreversible conversion of androgens into estrogens. Certain agricultural fungicides, such as prochloraz and

vinclozolin, as well as the herbicide Atrazine, have been shown to act as potent aromatase inhibitors or inducers. By inhibiting aromatase, these chemicals prevent the formation of estrogen, leading to "androgenization" and reproductive dysfunction. Conversely, the induction of aromatase by other EDCs can lead to excessive estrogen levels, which is a significant driver in the development of hormone-sensitive cancers and precocious puberty in pediatric populations (Bernini et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Enzymatic disruption also extends to the steroidogenic acute regulatory (StAR) protein and

various hydroxylases involved in the synthesis of cortisol and aldosterone. EDCs such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and certain plasticizers have been found to inhibit 3β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase (3β -HSD), thereby stalling the production of progesterone and downstream corticosteroids. This interference not only compromises reproductive success by altering menstrual regularity and sperm maturation but also impairs the body's ability to manage stress and electrolyte balance through the adrenal axis. Recent studies post-2020 have highlighted how these enzymatic blockades often result in a "compensatory feedback" response from the pituitary gland, which over-secretes gonadotropins in an attempt to restore balance, ultimately leading to glandular hyperplasia and chronic endocrine exhaustion (Kahn et al., 2020; Vinggaard et al., 2021).

Moreover, EDCs significantly interfere with the enzymes responsible for the degradation and

clearance of hormones, such as sulfotransferases (SULTs) and UDP-glucuronosyltransferases (UGTs). By inhibiting these detoxification enzymes, chemicals like triclosan and certain parabens prolong the half-life of circulating estrogens and thyroid hormones, effectively "potentiating" their biological activity far beyond physiological requirements. This leads to a state of chronic hyper-estrogenism or thyroid dysregulation even if the absolute production rate of the hormone remains normal. Additionally, EDCs can interfere with the deiodinase enzymes (D1, D2, and D3) that regulate the activation of thyroid hormones (T_4 to T_3) in peripheral tissues. Disruption of deiodinase activity, particularly by flame retardants (PBDEs), prevents the brain and heart from receiving active thyroid signals, manifesting as cognitive delays and metabolic depression (Reddam et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2022).

Table 7. Key Enzymes Targeted by EDCs and Resulting Pathologies

Enzyme	Normal Function	Targeting Chemicals	Resulting Pathologies
Aromatase (CYP19A1)	Androgen to Estrogen conversion	Atrazine, Prochloraz	Feminization; Infertility
3β -HSD	Progesterone/Steroid synthesis	PFAS, Phthalates	Adrenal & Reproductive failure
5α -Reductase	Testosterone to DHT conversion	Finasteride-like EDCs	Impaired male genital development
Deiodinases (D1/D2)	T_4 to active T_3 conversion	PBDEs, PCBs	Developmental neurotoxicity
SULTs / UGTs	Hormone clearance/Inactivation	Triclosan, Parabens	Hormone accumulation/Hyper-activity

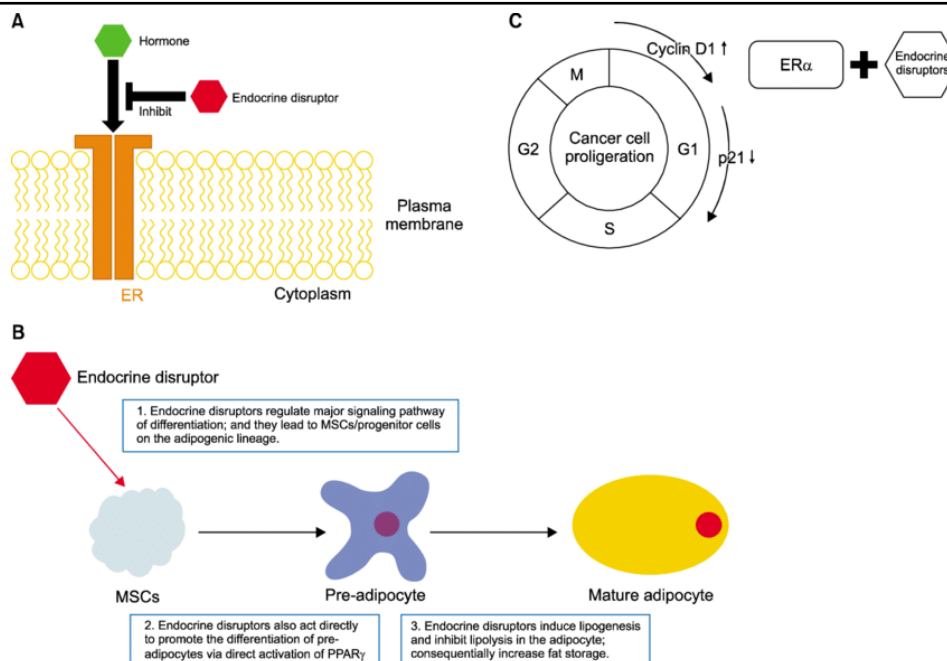


Figure 2. Common molecular mechanisms of endocrine disruptors (Adopted from Yang et al., 2015)

This figure illustrates the multi-faceted molecular mechanisms by which endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) interfere with cellular homeostasis and contribute to disease progression.

Panel A demonstrates the competitive inhibition of endogenous hormones at the plasma membrane, where EDCs bind to estrogen receptors (ER), effectively blocking physiological signaling.

Panel B elucidates the "obesogen" hypothesis, showing how EDCs dysregulate the differentiation of mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs). By activating key transcription factors such as PPAR γ , EDCs promote the lineage commitment of progenitor cells toward a pre-adipocyte state and subsequent maturation into adipocytes, thereby increasing lipid storage capacity. Finally,

Panel C details the oncogenic potential of EDCs; through interaction with ER α , these chemicals upregulate Cyclin D1 and downregulate p21, leading to accelerated cell cycle progression and uncontrolled cancer cell proliferation. Collectively, the diagram highlights how EDCs disrupt hormonal balance, metabolic health, and cell cycle regulation.

4. Impact on Human Health and Clinical Symptoms

4.1 Reproductive Health and Fertility

The impact of Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) on reproductive health represents one of the most well-documented areas of environmental clinical pathology. In males, the overarching clinical manifestation is often described as Testicular Dysgenesis Syndrome (TDS), a developmental disorder hypothesized to originate in utero due to anti-androgenic exposure. This syndrome encompasses a constellation of symptoms including hypospadias, cryptorchidism (undescended testes), and a significant decline in adult semen quality, characterized by low sperm count and impaired motility. Phthalates and bisphenols are primary drivers of this condition; they interfere with the "androgen-sensitive window" of fetal development, resulting in a permanently reduced number of Sertoli and Leydig cells. Recent longitudinal data post-2020 confirms that these structural changes during gestation correlate with a higher incidence of testicular germ cell tumors and subfertility in young men, highlighting the irreversible nature of early-life hormonal interference (Bernini et al., 2021; Kahn et al., 2020).

In females, EDC exposure is a recognized risk factor for complex gynecological disorders, most notably Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis. High urinary concentrations of phthalates and Bisphenol A (BPA) have been significantly correlated with the hormonal imbalances that define PCOS, such as hyperandrogenism and insulin resistance. These chemicals disrupt the feedback loops of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian (HPO) axis, leading to chronic anovulation and the formation of ovarian cysts. Furthermore, EDCs acting as estrogen mimics contribute to the pathogenesis of endometriosis by promoting the survival and proliferation of endometrial-like tissue outside the uterine cavity. Recent studies by Wang et al. (2021) demonstrate that phthalate exposure not only increases the risk of developing these conditions but also exacerbates clinical symptoms, such as severe pelvic pain and recurrent miscarriage, by inducing a state of chronic pelvic inflammation and oxidative stress (Wang et al., 2021; Santangeli et al., 2019).

Beyond specific syndromes, EDCs have a profound effect on the general timeline of reproductive development, particularly regarding the onset of puberty. Evidence suggests a global trend toward precocious (early-onset) puberty in girls, linked to the ubiquitous presence of estrogenic chemicals like parabens and flame retardants in personal care products and household dust. Conversely, some EDCs can delay pubertal maturation in boys by blocking androgen signaling. These alterations in developmental timing are not merely physiological shifts; they are associated with long-term health risks, including a higher predisposition to hormone-sensitive cancers of the breast and prostate later in life. The persistent nature of chemicals like PFAS further complicates reproductive health by reducing the "fecundability" (the probability of conceiving in a given month) of couples, as these substances accumulate in follicular fluid and seminal plasma, impairing the viability of gametes even before fertilization occurs (DeWitt et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2022).

Table 8. Reproductive Pathologies and Associated EDC Exposure

Testicular Dysgenesis (TDS)	Phthalates, Vinclozolin	Low sperm count, Cryptorchidism	Anti-androgenic effect in utero
PCOS	BPA, Phthalates	Irregular cycles, Hirsutism	HPO axis disruption & Insulin resistance
Endometriosis	Dioxins, PCBs, BPA	Chronic pelvic pain, Infertility	Estrogen-driven tissue proliferation
Precocious Puberty	Parabens, Phthalates	Early breast/hair development	Premature activation of GPR54/GnRH
Recurrent Miscarriage	PFAS, Pesticides	Spontaneous pregnancy loss	Placental toxicity & Epigenetic changes

4.2 Neurodevelopmental and Behavioral Disorders

The human brain is exceptionally sensitive to thyroid hormone fluctuations, as these hormones are the master regulators of neuronal migration, synaptogenesis, and myelination during critical developmental windows. Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) that interfere with the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Thyroid (HPT) axis, such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs) and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), are primary

drivers of neurodevelopmental pathologies. These chemicals possess structural similarities to thyroxine (T_4), allowing them to competitively bind to thyroid transport proteins like transthyretin (TTR) or interfere with thyroid hormone receptors in the developing cortex. Recent epidemiological syntheses post-2020 have confirmed that even subclinical maternal thyroid disruption—induced by a cocktail of environmental flame retardants—is significantly correlated with reductions in offspring IQ and

diminished executive function (Reddam et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2022).

Beyond cognitive deficits, the increasing environmental burden of EDCs is strongly linked to the rising global incidence of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Research has demonstrated that prenatal exposure to organophosphate pesticides and phthalates can alter the dopaminergic and serotonergic systems, which are essential for behavioral regulation and social cognition. EDCs can also trigger neuroinflammation by activating microglial cells, the brain's resident immune cells, leading to an over-pruning of synapses or abnormal neural connectivity patterns associated with the autistic phenotype. Recent cohort studies have identified that children with higher urinary concentrations of phthalate metabolites are twice as likely to exhibit ADHD-related behaviors compared to those with lower exposure levels, highlighting a clear dose-response relationship between plasticizer exposure and neurobehavioral morbidity (Kahn et al., 2020; Radke et al., 2021).

The neurotoxic impact of EDCs is further complicated by the "hidden" nature of thyroid disruption. Many EDCs act as peripheral deiodinase inhibitors, preventing the conversion of T_4 to the active T_3 form specifically within brain tissues, even when standard blood tests show "normal" systemic thyroid levels. This tissue-specific hypothyroidism can lead to permanent structural alterations in the cerebellum and hippocampus, areas of the brain responsible for motor coordination and memory formation. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that EDCs like PFAS may disrupt the blood-brain barrier (BBB) integrity in early life, allowing other environmental neurotoxins to enter the central nervous system more easily. This synergistic neurotoxicity underscores the necessity for more comprehensive developmental neurotoxicity (DNT) testing in chemical regulatory frameworks to prevent further erosion of global cognitive capital (DeWitt et al., 2020; Heindel et al., 2022).

Table 9. EDCs and Their Specific Neurodevelopmental Impacts

PBDEs	Furniture, Household Dust	Thyroid Hormone Mimicry	Reduced IQ, Learning Disabilities
Phthalates	Cosmetics, Plastics	Dopaminergic Disruption	ADHD, Impulsivity
PCBs	Legacy Pollutants	HPT Axis Interference	ASD, Poor Social Cognition
Organophosphates	Pesticides	Acetylcholinesterase Inhibition	Motor Delays, ADHD
PFAS	Food Packaging	PPAR-mediated Neurotoxicity	Executive Function Deficits

4.3 Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity (The Obesogen Hypothesis)

The emergence of the "Obesogen Hypothesis" has fundamentally altered our understanding of the global obesity epidemic, shifting the focus from purely caloric intake to the role of environmental chemical "programming." Certain Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs), specifically categorized as obesogens, are now recognized for their ability to inappropriately regulate lipid metabolism and adipogenesis. A quintessential example of this is Tributyltin (TBT), an organotin

compound used in marine paints and industrial water systems. TBT acts as a potent dual agonist for the Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor gamma (PPAR γ) and the Retinoid X Receptor (RXR). By activating this heterodimer, TBT essentially "hacks" the developmental fate of multipotent mesenchymal stem cells, forcing them to differentiate into adipocytes (fat cells) rather than bone or muscle cells. This process not only increases the total number of fat cells in the body but also enhances the capacity of existing cells to store lipids,

leading to a permanent predisposition to weight gain (Heindel & Blumberg, 2019; Heindel et al., 2022).

Beyond the structural expansion of fat tissue, obesogenic EDCs like Bisphenol A (BPA) and PFAS interfere with the hormonal regulation of hunger and satiety. These chemicals can disrupt the secretion and sensitivity of leptin and ghrelin, the master hormones governing appetite control in the hypothalamus. Recent clinical studies post-2020 have demonstrated that individuals with high serum levels of perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) exhibit a lower resting metabolic rate and a higher tendency for "weight regain" following dietary interventions. This suggests that EDCs can essentially reset the body's metabolic "thermostat" to a higher adiposity level, making traditional weight-loss efforts significantly less effective. Furthermore, the impact of these chemicals is highly visible in pediatric populations, where early-life exposure to phthalates has been consistently linked to increased body mass index (BMI) and the early onset of insulin resistance (Kahn et al., 2020; Vinggaard et al., 2021).

The metabolic disruption caused by EDCs extends into the pathogenesis of Type 2 Diabetes (T2D) and Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD). Many EDCs are known to induce oxidative stress and inflammation within pancreatic β -cells, impairing insulin secretion. Simultaneously, they promote insulin resistance in peripheral tissues by interfering with the glucose transporter (GLUT4) translocation process. Modern research highlights that EDCs like dioxins and PCBs can activate the Aryl hydrocarbon Receptor (AhR), which leads to abnormal lipid accumulation in the liver, mimicking the effects of a high-fat diet even in the absence of nutritional excess. This multi-organ metabolic insult creates a "perfect storm" for metabolic syndrome, where the cumulative effect of low-dose, chronic chemical exposure during developmental windows dictates long-term metabolic health (Heindel & Blumberg, 2019; Sun et al., 2022).

Table 10. Common Obesogens and Their Metabolic Targets

Tributyltin (TBT)	Marine paint, PVC	PPAR γ / RXR	Increased fat cell number (Adipogenesis)
Bisphenol A (BPA)	Plastic liners, thermal receipts	Estrogen receptors / Insulin	Insulin resistance, obesity
Phthalates	Fragrances, plastics	PPAR α / Thyroid	Lower metabolic rate, high BMI
PFAS	Non-stick pans, water	PPAR γ / Liver enzymes	High cholesterol, fatty liver
Dioxins	Industrial byproducts	AhR	Impaired glucose tolerance

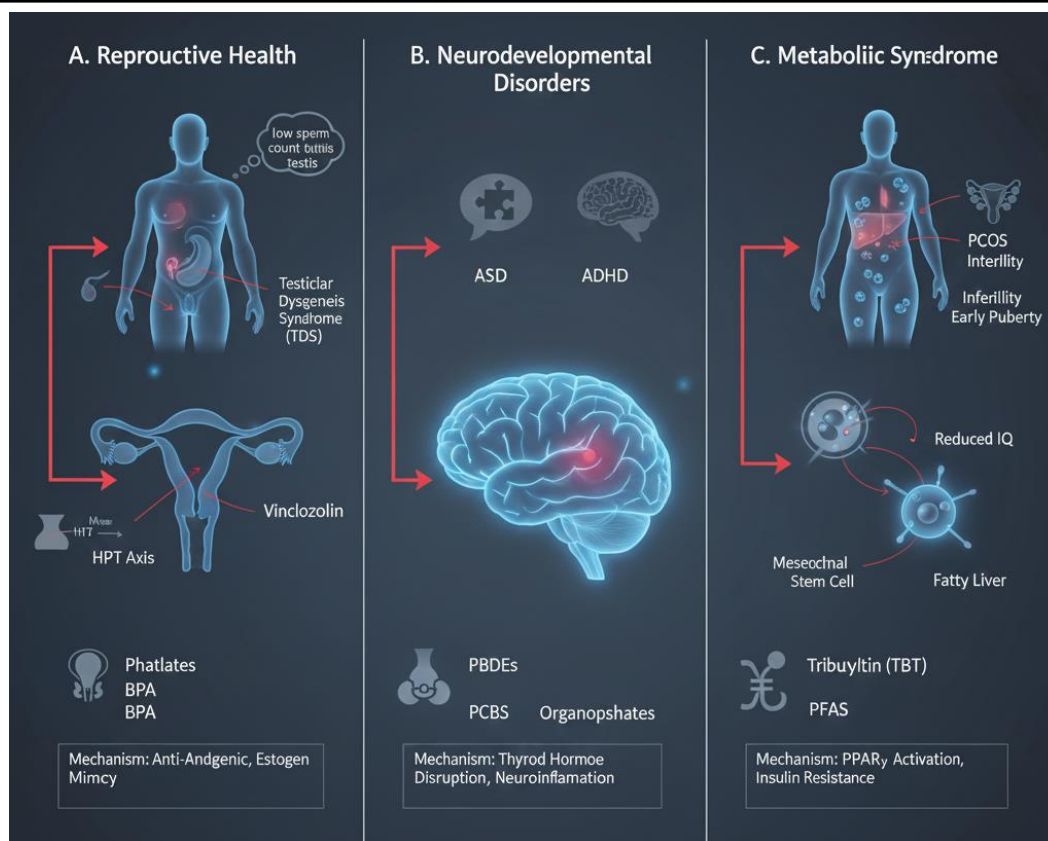


Figure 3. The Triad of EDC-Induced Pathologies

This figure illustrates the systemic clinical manifestations of EDC exposure. Panel A (Reproductive) highlights the disruption of the HPG axis and the development of Testicular Dysgenesis Syndrome and PCOS. Panel B (Neurodevelopmental) depicts the interference with thyroid-mediated brain maturation and neuroinflammation leading to cognitive deficits and ASD/ADHD. Panel C (Metabolic) outlines the "Obesogen Hypothesis," demonstrating how chemical programming via PPAR γ shifts mesenchymal stem cell differentiation toward adipogenesis and induces systemic insulin resistance.

Conclusion

The evidence synthesized in this review confirms that EDCs are not merely environmental contaminants but are potent biological disruptors that threaten human health at the molecular level. Their ability to induce transgenerational epigenetic changes means that today's pollution is tomorrow's genetic burden. To mitigate this crisis, a transition toward "green

chemistry," stricter regulatory limits on PFAS and phthalates, and increased public awareness regarding dietary and cosmetic choices are essential. Protecting the endocrine system is fundamental to ensuring the health and viability of future generations.

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