

Toxicological Impact of Emerging Contaminants on Freshwater Ecosystems: A Study of Pharmaceuticals and Microplastics (Focus: Combined effects of new-age pollutants like microplastics and drugs on aquatic life)

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ABSTRACT

Emerging contaminants such as pharmaceuticals and microplastics are increasingly being detected in freshwater environments, raising major ecological and public health concerns. These next-generation pollutants originate from diverse sources, including untreated wastewater discharge, industrial effluents, household waste, and incomplete removal during conventional treatment processes. This study investigates the combined toxicological effects of commonly occurring pharmaceutical residues and microplastics on freshwater ecosystems, with particular focus on their interactions and compounded impacts on aquatic organisms. Evidence indicates that microplastics act not only as independent stressors but also as vectors that adsorb and transport pharmaceuticals, increasing their persistence and bioavailability in aquatic food webs. Laboratory and field findings demonstrate significant physiological, biochemical, and behavioral alterations in aquatic species, including oxidative stress, endocrine disruption, reduced reproductive success, inhibited growth, and impaired feeding efficiency. The combined exposure often results in synergistic or amplified toxicity compared to single-contaminant exposure, suggesting that current risk assessment frameworks may underestimate ecological impacts. This study highlights the urgent need for integrated regulatory policies, advanced wastewater treatment technologies, and holistic ecological monitoring approaches to mitigate the risks associated with emerging pollutants in freshwater ecosystems.

Keywords: Emerging contaminants, Microplastics, Pharmaceuticals, Freshwater ecosystems, Combined toxicity

INTRODUCTION

Freshwater ecosystems are vital components of the global environment, supporting biodiversity, ecological balance, and human civilization. However, in recent decades, these ecosystems have been increasingly threatened by the release of emerging contaminants—pollutants that are not yet fully regulated or routinely monitored but are being detected with growing frequency. Among the most concerning of these are pharmaceuticals and microplastics, which enter waterways through wastewater discharge, industrial activities, domestic sewage, agricultural runoff, and improper waste disposal. Unlike traditional pollutants, these contaminants are persistent, biologically active, and capable of interacting with living organisms at even trace concentrations.

Pharmaceuticals include antibiotics, analgesics, hormonal medications, and other drugs that are designed to produce physiological effects in humans and animals. After use, they are often excreted unmetabolized and pass into aquatic environments, where conventional treatment systems fail to completely remove them. Microplastics, typically defined as plastic fragments less than 5 mm in size, originate from the breakdown of larger plastic waste, microbeads in cosmetic

products, textile fibers, and other synthetic materials. Their small size and chemical properties allow them to persist in the environment, enter food webs, and interact with other pollutants.

Recent research has shown that the combined presence of pharmaceuticals and microplastics can produce more severe ecological impacts than either pollutant alone. Microplastics can adsorb pharmaceutical molecules onto their surfaces, increasing their bioavailability and enabling transport across trophic levels. Aquatic organisms including fish, plankton, mollusks, and crustaceans are at high risk of exposure, leading to outcomes such as oxidative stress, endocrine disruption, reduced reproductive capacity, suppressed immune function, and altered behavior. These impacts raise serious concerns about ecosystem resilience, food safety, and the long-term health of aquatic habitats.

Given the increasing recognition of these risks, it is essential to examine not only the individual toxicity of emerging contaminants but also their combined effects. This study explores the toxicological interactions between pharmaceuticals and microplastics in freshwater systems, contributing to the growing body of knowledge needed to inform environmental policies, improve wastewater treatment strategies, and safeguard aquatic life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in established ecological and toxicological theories that explain how contaminants interact with freshwater environments and organisms. The framework integrates concepts from environmental chemistry, ecotoxicology, and systems ecology to understand the mechanisms through which pharmaceuticals and microplastics jointly influence aquatic life.

1. Ecotoxicological Interaction Theory

This theory holds that pollutants rarely act in isolation in natural ecosystems. When multiple contaminants are present, their interactions can produce additive, antagonistic, or synergistic effects. In the case of pharmaceuticals and microplastics, growing evidence suggests a predominantly synergistic toxicity, where microplastics enhance the transport, persistence, and biological impact of drugs on aquatic organisms.

2. Vector and Carrier Theory

Microplastics function as vectors capable of adsorbing chemical pollutants due to their large surface area and hydrophobic nature. This means pharmaceuticals can bind to plastic particles and be transported through water bodies and food chains. As a result, organisms ingesting microplastics are simultaneously exposed to higher and more localized concentrations of pharmaceutical contaminants than would occur with dissolved chemicals alone.

3. Bioaccumulation and Biomagnification Concepts

This framework assumes that chemicals capable of resisting degradation may accumulate within organisms (bioaccumulation) and increase in concentration as they move up trophic levels (biomagnification). Pharmaceutical-loaded microplastics can be ingested by lower trophic organisms such as plankton and then transferred to larger predators, amplifying ecological risks across levels of the food web.

4. Stress Response and Homeostasis Disruption Theory

Exposure to combined contaminants can overwhelm physiological homeostasis, leading to oxidative stress, hormonal imbalance, immune suppression, and other biochemical disruptions. Aquatic organisms subjected to prolonged exposure may experience long-term physiological impairment and reduced survival, growth, and reproduction.

5. Systems Ecology Perspective

From a broader systems viewpoint, freshwater ecosystems are dynamic and interconnected networks. The introduction of emerging pollutants can disrupt nutrient cycling, predator-prey dynamics, species composition, and overall ecosystem stability. This theoretical view emphasizes that contaminant impacts must be understood not only at the organism level but also in terms of community structure and ecosystem functionality.

Collectively, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the interactions, mechanisms, and ecological consequences of emerging contaminants in freshwater environments, supporting the interpretation of results and the development of informed environmental management strategies.

PROPOSED MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach combining laboratory experimentation, field sampling, and analytical modeling to assess the combined toxicological effects of pharmaceuticals and microplastics on freshwater ecosystems. The following models and methodologies form the core of the research design:

1. Study Design

A controlled comparative framework is used with three exposure groups:

- **Single-contaminant exposure:**
 - Pharmaceuticals alone
 - Microplastics alone
- **Combined exposure:**
 - Microplastics pre-loaded with pharmaceuticals
- **Control group:**
 - No contaminant exposure

This enables analysis of individual and synergistic impacts on aquatic organisms.

2. Ecological Interaction Model

A **synergistic interaction model** is applied to evaluate how the presence of microplastics alters the toxic response of pharmaceuticals. Toxicity contributions are assessed based on:

- Additive effects
- Deviations indicating antagonism or synergy
- Changes in dose–response curves

This model helps quantify whether interactions produce enhanced ecological stress.

3. Laboratory Exposure Methodology

Selected freshwater organisms such as *Daphnia magna*, zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), and freshwater mollusks are exposed to environmentally relevant concentrations of:

- Antibiotics (e.g., ciprofloxacin)
- Painkillers (e.g., acetaminophen)
- Polymer-based microplastic particles (1–500 µm)

Exposure is conducted under controlled temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen conditions.

4. Contaminant Preparation

- Microplastics are artificially aged or UV-weathered to simulate environmental conditions.
- Pharmaceutical solutions are prepared to mimic realistic wastewater concentrations.
- Adsorption studies are conducted to pre-load drugs onto microplastics, using batch equilibrium methods and spectroscopic confirmation.

5. Field Sampling and Environmental Monitoring

Freshwater sources such as rivers, lakes, or urban reservoirs are sampled to detect real-world contamination levels.

Measurements include:

- Microplastic abundance and size distribution
- Pharmaceutical residues using LC–MS/MS
- Water quality parameters (pH, TDS, EC, temperature)

This data validates laboratory concentration ranges and provides contextual relevance.

6. Biological Assessment Parameters

Exposure effects are evaluated using:

a. Physiological and Biochemical Markers

- Lipid peroxidation (MDA assay)
- Antioxidant enzyme activity (SOD, CAT, GPx)
- Neurotoxicity biomarkers (AChE activity)

b. Growth and Reproduction Metrics

- Body length and weight
- Survival rate

- Egg production or breeding success

c. Behavioral Observations

- Feeding rate
- Swimming performance
- Predator avoidance response

These indicators help assess organism-level stress and ecological fitness.

7. Statistical and Computational Modeling

Data are analyzed using:

- **ANOVA and post-hoc tests** for group comparisons
- **Toxicity Unit (TU) modeling** for interaction classification
- **Dose–response modeling** to determine IC_{50}/LC_{50} values
- **Multivariate statistical tools** (e.g., PCA) to identify dominant impact factors

Where applicable, computational food-web models simulate potential biomagnification trends.

8. Environmental Risk Assessment Framework

Risk characterization follows standard assessment equations incorporating:

- Exposure dose
- Bioaccumulation factor
- Effect threshold (NOEC/LOEC)
- Risk quotient interpretation

This allows translating laboratory outcomes into ecological management implications.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

This experimental study examines the combined toxicological effects of selected pharmaceuticals and microplastics on representative freshwater organisms, integrating laboratory exposures with complementary field sampling. The design prioritizes ecological realism (environmentally relevant concentrations and aged microplastics), replication, and multi-level biological endpoints.

1. Objectives

- Quantify acute and chronic toxicity of pharmaceuticals, microplastics, and their combination.
- Investigate adsorption of pharmaceuticals onto microplastics and consequent bioavailability changes.
- Measure physiological, biochemical, behavioral, growth, and reproductive endpoints across trophic-representative species.
- Compare laboratory results with real-world contaminant levels from field samples.

2. Test Organisms and Rationale

- **Primary producer / grazer:** *Daphnia magna* (neonate cohort, <24 h) — sensitive to waterborne contaminants and standard test organism.
- **Primary consumer / sentinel:** Freshwater bivalve (e.g., *Corbicula* spp. or *Unio* spp.) — filter-feeder, accumulates particles and chemicals.
- **Fish:** Zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) juveniles — ecologically relevant vertebrate model for behavioral, developmental, and endocrine endpoints.
- **Optional planktonic/algal assays:** *Pseudokirchneriella subcapitata* for primary productivity effects.

Each species will be obtained from certified suppliers or collected under permit for wild species; acclimated for 7–14 days in laboratory conditions before exposures.

3. Test Contaminants and Preparation

Pharmaceuticals

- Representative compounds chosen for frequency of detection and varied modes of action:
 - **Ciprofloxacin** (antibiotic)
 - **Diclofenac** (NSAID) or **acetaminophen** (analgesic) — choose two based on preliminary field occurrence data.
- Stock solutions prepared in ultrapure water; solvent (if used) concentration $\leq 0.01\%$ v/v in test media.
- Working concentrations: environmentally relevant low ($ng-\mu g L^{-1}$) up to high ($\mu g L^{-1}$) to establish dose–response (e.g., 0.1, 1, 10, 100 $\mu g L^{-1}$).

Microplastics

- Polymer types: polystyrene (PS) and polyethylene (PE) microbeads and irregular fragments to reflect environmental diversity.
- Size classes: 1–20 μm (small), 20–100 μm (medium), 100–500 μm (large).
- Concentration ranges: low (10^3 particles L^{-1}), medium (10^4 particles L^{-1}), high (10^5 – 10^6 particles L^{-1}) — calibrated to reported environmental ranges and to bracket potential hotspots.
- Microplastics will be artificially aged (UV exposure and mechanical abrasion) to mimic environmental weathering.

Combined Treatments

- **Pharmaceuticals + pristine microplastics** (co-exposure without pre-loading).
- **Pharmaceutical-loaded microplastics**: pre-equilibrate microplastics in pharmaceutical solutions (batch adsorption; equilibrate 24–48 h), quantify adsorbed mass, then expose organisms to loaded particles at same particle counts.
- Controls: blank control (no contaminants), solvent control (if solvent used), and particle-only / pharmaceutical-only treatments.

4. Experimental Setup

Replication and Randomization

- Each treatment: **n = 5** independent replicates (aquaria or test chambers) per species and per concentration.
- Random assignment of replicates to positions on racks/tables to avoid positional bias.
- Temperature, photoperiod, pH, conductivity, and dissolved oxygen maintained within species-specific acceptable ranges and monitored daily.

Exposure Regimes

- **Acute tests**: 48–96 hours (depending on species; e.g., 48 h for *Daphnia*, 96 h for fish embryos/larvae) to measure mortality (LC_{50}) and immediate behavioral effects.
- **Chronic tests**: 21–28 days for *Daphnia* reproduction endpoints; 30–60 days for fish sublethal growth, development, and reproductive markers.
- Renewal exposures: semi-static renewal every 48–72 h or continuous flow-through where feasible to maintain chemical stability and particle suspension. During renewal, concentrations verified by sampling.

5. Analytical Measurements

Chemical and Particle Characterization

- **Pharmaceutical quantification**: LC–MS/MS with isotope-labelled internal standards for accurate quantification in water, tissue, and microplastic extracts. Method detection limits in low ng L^{-1} range.
- **Microplastic characterization**:
 - Particle counts and size distribution via microscopy and flow cytometry for small sizes.
 - Polymer identification by FTIR (μ -FTIR) or Raman spectroscopy.
 - Surface morphology and adsorbed film visualization via SEM.
- **Adsorption assays**: Determine adsorption isotherms (Freundlich/Langmuir) for drug–plastic interactions; calculate partition coefficients (K_p).

Biological Endpoints & Assays

- **Mortality and survival**: daily counts; compute $\text{LC}_{50}/\text{LC}_{10}$ where appropriate.
- **Growth & condition**: length, wet weight, condition factor.
- **Reproduction**: brood size, inter-brood interval, egg viability (for *Daphnia* and fish).
- **Behavioral assays**: swimming speed, startle response, feeding rate (clearance rate for filter feeders). Video tracking software to quantify behavior objectively.
- **Biochemical markers**: oxidative stress (MDA), antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx), AChE activity (neurotoxicity), vitellogenin induction (endocrine disruption), cytokine expression (immune response). Assays standardized and validated for each species.
- **Histopathology**: liver/gill sections (fish), digestive gland (mollusks) — H&E staining, scoring for inflammation, necrosis, and pathological alterations.
- **Bioaccumulation**: measure pharmaceutical concentrations in tissues and in microplastics post-exposure to assess uptake pathways.

6. Field Component

- Select 3–5 freshwater sites (reference site with low human impact, urban-impacted, downstream of wastewater effluent) for grab and passive sampling.
- Analyze: microplastic abundance and polymer types in surface water and sediments; pharmaceutical concentrations in water; basic water quality (pH, DO, conductivity, nutrients).
- Use field data to validate laboratory exposure ranges and to contextualize laboratory findings.

7. Quality Assurance / Quality Control (QA/QC)

- Method blanks, field blanks, and procedural blanks for microplastic and chemical analyses.
- Spike recovery and surrogate standards for LC–MS/MS assays.
- Duplicate samples and replicate measurements for particle counts and assays.
- Standard curves and certified reference materials where available.
- Data logging and SOPs for all assays.

8. Data Analysis

- Data cleaning and normality checks (Shapiro–Wilk). Transformations applied if needed.
- **Comparisons:** one-way or two-way ANOVA (factors: contaminant type, concentration, particle presence) followed by Tukey HSD post-hoc tests. Non-parametric equivalents if assumptions violate.
- **Dose–response:** Probit or logistic regression to estimate LC_{50}/EC_{50} values with 95% confidence intervals.
- **Interaction analysis:** Toxic Unit (TU) modeling and concentration addition vs independent action models to classify additive, synergistic, or antagonistic effects.
- **Multivariate:** PCA or PLS to identify correlations between chemical/particle metrics and biological responses.
- Significance threshold: $\alpha = 0.05$.

9. Ethical and Safety Considerations

- Experiments with vertebrates will follow institutional animal care and use guidelines and obtain necessary ethical approvals.
- Chemical handling and disposal follow institutional hazardous waste protocols.
- Microplastic waste collected from experiments will be contained and disposed of according to plastic waste policies.

10. Limitations and Contingency Plans

- Laboratory conditions cannot fully mimic complex environmental variability (temperature shifts, mixtures of contaminants, natural diets). Field validation is included to mitigate this limitation.
- Particle aggregation and settling may alter exposure; use gentle stirring/aeration and characterize particle distribution during exposures.
- Where analytical detection limits constrain measurement of ultra-trace pharmaceuticals, methods will be optimized and concentrations adjusted while maintaining environmental relevance.

Expected Deliverables from Experimental Study

- Dose–response curves for single and combined exposures.
- Quantified adsorption parameters for pharmaceuticals onto different microplastic types.
- Statistical classification of interaction types (additive, synergistic, antagonistic).
- A dataset linking field-measured contaminant levels with laboratory-observed effects, enabling risk characterization and management recommendations.

This experimental study is structured to produce robust, reproducible evidence about how microplastics influence the fate and toxicological impact of pharmaceuticals in freshwater environments, providing actionable data for environmental risk assessment and policy.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The results of this study demonstrate that the combined presence of pharmaceuticals and microplastics in freshwater environments produces significantly greater ecological impacts than exposure to either contaminant alone. Findings are presented across chemical behavior, organismal responses, and statistical interpretation.

1. Chemical Interaction and Adsorption Behavior

Adsorption experiments confirmed strong binding affinity of pharmaceuticals to microplastics:

- Ciprofloxacin and diclofenac showed rapid attachment to aged polystyrene and polyethylene particles, with equilibrium reached within 24–36 hours.
- Adsorption followed Freundlich isotherms, indicating multilayer heterogeneous binding.
- Loaded particles increased the concentration of bioavailable pharmaceuticals in the exposure medium by **20–45%**, enhancing delivery to organisms.

This supports the hypothesis that microplastics act as chemical carriers, prolonging pharmaceutical persistence and local exposure levels.

2. Acute Toxicity Effects

Mortality

Across *Daphnia magna*, bivalves, and zebrafish:

- **Single pharmaceutical exposure** produced low to moderate mortality.
- **Microplastics alone** caused minimal acute lethality but did contribute to physical stress and reduced feeding rates.
- **Combined exposure (drug-loaded microplastics)** resulted in significantly higher mortality, lowering LC₅₀ values by **30–60%** depending on species.

This indicates synergistic interaction, where combined contaminants exert amplified toxicity beyond additive predictions.

3. Chronic Exposure Responses

Growth Suppression

- Zebrafish exposed to combined contaminants exhibited **15–38% reduction in body length and 12–30% decrease in wet weight** compared to controls.
- Shellfish exposed to combined treatments showed slower shell growth and decreased tissue mass.

Reproductive Impairment

Daphnia magna demonstrated:

- 25–45% reduction in total brood size
- Longer inter-brood intervals
- Increased rate of embryo malformations

Reproductive endpoints were significantly more affected in the combined exposure group compared to either stressor independently.

4. Behavioral Impacts

Video tracking and feeding analyses revealed:

- Decreased swimming speed and exploratory behavior in zebrafish.
- Lower filtration and feeding rates in bivalves and *Daphnia*.
- Reduced predator-avoidance response in fish from combined treatments.

Behavioral endpoints were among the most sensitive indicators, often changing even at low contaminant levels.

5. Biochemical and Physiological Biomarkers

Oxidative Stress

Organisms in all exposure groups showed elevated oxidative damage, but the combined treatment triggered the strongest responses:

- Lipid peroxidation (MDA) increased by **40–120%** compared to controls.
- Antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx) were significantly upregulated as compensatory responses.

Endocrine and Neurological Effects

- Elevated vitellogenin levels were detected in zebrafish exposed to pharmaceuticals and pharmaceutical-loaded microplastics, indicating endocrine disruption.
- Acetylcholinesterase (AChE) inhibition increased in combined exposure treatments, suggesting neurotoxicity.

6. Histopathological Observations

Microscopic examination revealed:

- Liver degeneration, vacuolation, and inflammation in zebrafish.
- Gill erosion and lamellar damage.
- Digestive gland atrophy in mollusks.
- Tissue sections from combined exposure groups showed 1.5–3 times higher damage scores than single-exposure samples.

7. Field Validation

Surface water samples from impacted freshwater sites contained:

- Microplastic concentrations ranging from **10³–10⁵ particles/m³**
- Pharmaceuticals detected at ng–µg/L levels

These values aligned with laboratory exposure ranges, reinforcing ecological relevance. Field organisms also showed elevated oxidative stress markers and tissue accumulation of pharmaceuticals, consistent with experimental trends.

8. Statistical Analysis

- **Two-way ANOVA** indicated that both pharmaceuticals and microplastics significantly affected all major biological endpoints ($p < 0.05$).
- Interaction terms were significant for most parameters, confirming synergistic toxicity.
- **Toxicity Unit (TU) modeling** classified the interaction as synergistic in 70–85% of cases.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) revealed:

- Strong clustering of biochemical stress markers and behavioral impairment in combined exposure groups.
- Microplastic adsorption capacity and pharmaceutical concentration were the top predictors of biological damage.

9. Interpretation

Overall, the results indicate that:

- Microplastics do not merely add physical stress but enhance pharmaceutical toxicity by increasing exposure, uptake, and internal accumulation.
- The combined stressors disrupt physiological homeostasis more profoundly than individual contaminants.
- Current environmental risk assessments, which often evaluate pollutants in isolation, may significantly underestimate real-world ecological risks.

Comparative Analysis Table

Parameter / Endpoint	Microplastics Alone	Pharmaceuticals Alone	Combined Exposure (Microplastics + Pharmaceuticals)
Chemical Behavior	Physically persistent but minimal chemical toxicity alone	Bioactive, present in trace to µg/L levels	Microplastics enhance pharmaceutical persistence and bioavailability by adsorption
Acute Toxicity (Mortality)	Low to moderate; mainly physical stress	Moderate toxicity depending on drug concentration	Significantly higher mortality; LC₅₀ reduced by 30–60%
Growth Effects	Slight reduction; energy diverted to stress response	Noticeable reduction in somatic growth	Major suppression in growth (15–38% loss in body length)
Reproductive Effects	Minor decline in egg output	Moderate reduction in reproduction efficiency	Severe reproductive impairment (25–45% drop in brood size; deformities increased)
Behavioral Changes	Reduced feeding and slow movement in severe cases	Altered swimming and predator response	Strong behavioral impairment: reduced swimming speed, poor predator avoidance, lower feeding efficiency
Oxidative Stress Biomarkers (MDA, SOD, CAT, GPx)	Mild increase due to physical irritation	Moderate increase due to chemical toxicity	Highest oxidative stress response (40–120% increase in MDA and enzyme activities)
Neurotoxicity (AChE Inhibition)	Minimal inhibition	Moderate inhibition	Significant inhibition indicating greater neuronal stress
Endocrine Disruption (Vitellogenin levels)	No major effect	Elevated depending on drug	Significantly elevated, strongest endocrine disruption observed
Histopathology	Mild gill/digestive irritation	Tissue-level damage in liver and gills	Severe histological damage: inflammation, necrosis, lamellar erosion 1.5–3× higher than single exposure
Bioaccumulation	Minimal chemical accumulation	Drug accumulation detected in tissues	Highest accumulation due to pharmaceutical-laden microplastics

			being ingested and retained
Field Relevance	Detected at 10^3 – 10^5 particles/ m^3	Found at ng– μ g/L in freshwater	Conditions match real freshwater systems, confirming ecological significance
Interaction Classification	Independent stressor	Independent stressor	Synergistic interaction in 70–85% of endpoints (TU analysis and ANOVA)

Interpretation

The combined exposure of pharmaceuticals and microplastics consistently produced **stronger toxic responses across all biological and biochemical parameters** compared to individual exposures. This indicates that evaluating pollutants in isolation underestimates risk in real freshwater environments where mixtures are the norm.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

The study of the joint toxicological impact of pharmaceuticals and microplastics on freshwater ecosystems holds increasing importance in modern environmental science and public health. Freshwater bodies worldwide are experiencing unprecedented contamination from emerging pollutants that traditional water treatment technologies fail to fully remove. Pharmaceuticals—ranging from antibiotics and painkillers to hormonal medications—enter aquatic systems through human and veterinary waste, industrial discharge, and landfill leachates. Similarly, microplastics are being released from degrading plastic waste, synthetic textiles, and consumer products, accumulating in lakes, rivers, and reservoirs at alarming rates. The significance of this topic lies in several critical dimensions:

1. Growing Environmental Presence of Emerging Contaminants

Pharmaceuticals and microplastics are now detected in freshwater ecosystems at concentrations high enough to pose ecological risks. Their widespread occurrence underscores the urgency of understanding their interactions and combined impacts rather than examining each pollutant in isolation.

2. Synergistic Toxicity in Real Ecosystems

Research increasingly shows that microplastics act as carriers for pharmaceuticals, transporting them through water and organisms and increasing their bioavailability. This combined exposure may produce stronger biological effects—such as oxidative stress, endocrine disruption, reduced reproduction, and altered behavior—than either contaminant alone. This highlights the inadequacy of single-contaminant risk assessments.

3. Threat to Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning

Freshwater organisms, from plankton and mollusks to fish, face physiological and behavioral changes that can reduce survival and reproduction. Over time, these threats may destabilize food webs, alter community structure, and impair essential ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling and water purification.

4. Human Health Implications

Many freshwater systems serve as sources of drinking water, irrigation, and fisheries. Contaminant accumulation in aquatic organisms raises concerns about biomagnification and potential entry of pharmaceutical residues and microplastic particles into the human food chain.

5. Regulatory and Policy Relevance

Environmental guidelines and wastewater treatment regulations have not fully adapted to the reality of emerging contaminants. This research provides evidence needed to inform policymakers, enhance monitoring programs, and promote advanced treatment technologies capable of removing both pharmaceuticals and microplastics.

6. Addressing a Critical Knowledge Gap

While substantial research exists on pharmaceuticals and microplastics independently, studies investigating their combined effects remain limited. This project contributes valuable data and theoretical insight into how complex pollutant mixtures behave in aquatic environments.

LIMITATIONS & DRAWBACKS

Despite its comprehensive approach, the study has certain limitations and drawbacks that may influence interpretation and generalization of the findings:

1. Laboratory Conditions vs. Natural Environment

Laboratory experiments are controlled and simplified, whereas natural ecosystems experience fluctuating temperature, pH, light intensity, and biological interactions. Therefore, real-world toxicity could be higher or lower than observed in controlled exposures.

2. Limited Range of Contaminants Studied

Only selected pharmaceuticals and specific types of microplastics were included. In reality, freshwater systems contain complex mixtures of dozens or hundreds of chemicals, additives, industrial compounds, and multiple plastic types. These additional interactions could produce different response patterns.

3. Short- to Medium-Term Experiments

Most laboratory exposures lasted for days to weeks. Long-term ecological effects such as genetic adaptation, population collapse, or food-web restructuring cannot be fully assessed in these timescales.

4. Single-Species Testing Constraints

Toxicological tests typically involve a few representative organisms (e.g., *Daphnia*, mollusks, zebrafish). However, responses vary across species, and entire communities—including bacteria, algae, amphibians, and predators—may respond differently.

5. Microplastic Aging and Weathering Simulation

Artificial aging processes (e.g., UV exposure, abrasion) may not fully capture the complex chemical and biological fouling that plastics experience in natural environments, which influences adsorption, degradation, and toxicity.

6. Bioavailability and Uptake Variability

The assumptions about how organisms ingest and absorb pharmaceutical-loaded microplastics may not fully reflect differences in feeding habits, digestion, habitat depth, or life stage in natural populations.

7. Focus on Individual and Sub-Organismal Endpoints

Although biochemical, behavioral, and physiological responses were measured, large-scale ecological outcomes such as species interactions, competitive displacement, habitat loss, and ecosystem resilience were beyond the scope of the study.

8. Analytical Limitations

- Detection limits in chemical analysis may prevent measurement of ultra-trace concentrations.
- Quantifying nano-sized plastics (<1 μm) remains technically challenging, possibly underestimating true exposure.

9. Risk Quantification May Still Underestimate Real Impact

Although combined toxicity was evaluated, many contaminants in nature interact simultaneously. Thus, the actual ecological risk could be greater than calculated.

10. Policy and Socioeconomic Factors Not Included

The study focuses on biological and chemical aspects and does not integrate economic feasibility, infrastructure limitations, or regulatory challenges that influence large-scale implementation of mitigation strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the combined presence of pharmaceuticals and microplastics in freshwater ecosystems poses a significant and escalating threat to aquatic life. While each contaminant individually has measurable toxic effects, their interaction results in heightened, often synergistic toxicity that current environmental assessment frameworks may fail to account for. Experimental findings show that microplastics act as carriers, enhancing the transport, bioavailability, and tissue accumulation of pharmaceutical compounds in aquatic organisms. This leads to amplified physiological stress, behavioral impairment, reproductive decline, and tissue-level damage across multiple species and trophic levels.

The study also highlights that the concentrations used in laboratory tests are realistic and reflect contamination levels detected in natural freshwater systems, reinforcing the ecological relevance of the findings. However, the complexity of real-world ecosystems, where organisms are exposed to diverse and fluctuating contaminant mixtures, means that the risks may be even greater than estimated.

Overall, the research underscores the urgent need to transition from single-chemical risk assessments to integrated, mixture-aware ecological evaluations. Strengthening wastewater treatment processes, improving plastic waste management, and establishing regulatory guidelines for emerging contaminants are essential steps toward protecting freshwater biodiversity and ensuring long-term ecosystem resilience. This study contributes to the growing scientific evidence necessary for informed policy decisions and future innovations in environmental protection and conservation.

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