

Select Committee on PFAS (per and polyfluoroalkyl substances)

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13 September 2025

Dear Select Committee for PFAS,

I am writing to you today not only as a concerned citizen but as a mother who has experienced the heartbreak of a child's serious illness. My daughter's battle with childhood cancer (Leukaemia) has given me a personal and profound understanding of the need for greater vigilance over the chemicals present in our environment and our consumer goods. On behalf of parents of children with childhood cancer, it is with this urgency that I implore the Australian Government to take immediate and decisive action on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and to reform our chemical safety regulations.

PFAS, often called "forever chemicals," are a class of thousands of manufactured substances valued for their resistance to grease, water, and heat, leading to their widespread use. Their persistence in the environment and in the human body presents an unacceptable risk to public health. While Australian health authorities rightly note that further research is needed to establish a clear, causal link between PFAS exposure and all cancers, the precautionary principle demands immediate action. The scientific evidence is deeply concerning, with international bodies and Australian experts associating exposure with a range of serious health issues, including increased risk of certain cancers, thyroid disease, and immune system dysfunction. This concern is heightened by alarming local trends: according to the Leukaemia Foundation, Australia has seen a 40 per cent increase in blood cancer incidence in Australian children in the past two decades, with blood cancers set to become the most prevalent cancer by 2035¹. The Medical Journal of Australia cites an increase in 34% in childhood cancers between 1983 - 2015.²

Beyond consumer products, the environmental contamination caused by these chemicals is a matter of national concern. Due to their permanent nature, PFAS have polluted our soil and waterways, directly impacting our ecosystems and food chain. More troublingly, they are increasingly being found in our public drinking water supplies, creating a direct and unavoidable route of exposure for every Australian family.

The current lack of mandatory testing for chemicals in consumer products is a critical oversight. A 2025 Four Corners investigation, featuring paediatrician and researcher Dr. Christos Symeonides, revealed that of the 16,000 chemicals used in plastics, only one-third have been tested, with 75% of those tested found to be hazardous. This essentially means that we, as consumers, are unknowingly participating in a massive, uncontrolled experiment with our own health. We must move beyond this reactive approach and adopt a system that prioritises safety from the outset, demanding that plastics are not allowed to be used in food or personal care products unless they have been tested and proven to be non-hazardous to human health.

¹ <https://www.leukaemia.org.au/media/rising-blood-cancer-numbers-ripping-childhoods-away-from-australian-children/>

² www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/212/3/incidence-childhood-cancer-australia-1983-2015-and-projections-2035

To protect Australian families and future generations, I call on the government to implement the following mandatory actions:

1. **Mandate Pre-Market Safety Testing:** All food packaging and personal care products must undergo rigorous, mandatory testing for chemical safety, particularly for the presence of PFAS, before they are allowed on our supermarket shelves. This shifts the burden of proof to manufacturers, ensuring that all products are safe before they reach the consumer.
2. **Enact a Full Ban:** Institute a complete ban on the use of PFAS in all non-essential applications, including food packaging, personal care products, and agricultural products like fertilisers. Safe alternatives exist, and their use should be mandatory.
3. **Implement Clear Labelling:** Introduce a mandatory labelling standard that requires all food packaging and personal care products to clearly display whether they contain PFAS and, if so, at what levels. This empowers consumers to make informed choices for their families' health.
4. **Fund Further Research:** Allocate dedicated funding for independent, long-term studies to definitively establish the causal links between PFAS exposure and long-term health effects, particularly the rise in childhood cancers. This research is crucial to informing future policy and public health measures.

The tragic reality of rising rates of childhood illnesses, including cancer, demands our government take a proactive stance. The steps outlined above are not a matter of convenience or cost-effectiveness; they are a fundamental issue of public health and safety.

Thank you for your time and for considering this urgent request. I look forward to a future where my daughter and all Australian children can live in an environment free from these preventable chemical risks.

Sincerely,

Sophie Barrett

References:

<https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2024/3/20/new-report-plastic-chemicals-are-numerous-and-hazardous>

[Four Corners – Generation Cancer](#)