

## Reducing the impact of endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) on health in Belgium – Mutualités Libres

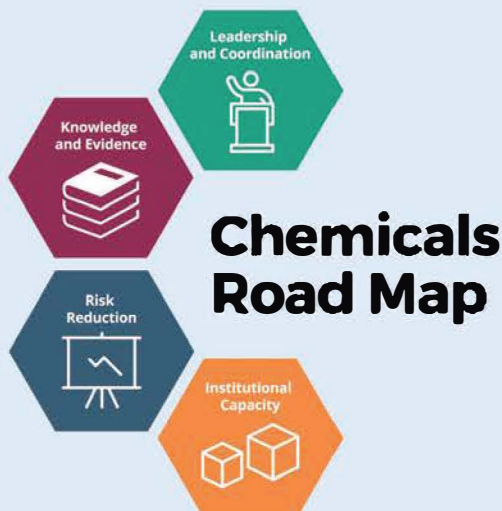
### Belgium

*Raising awareness among the general public and policy-makers on how to reduce exposure to health-harming EDCs in people's daily lives.*

### Goals and Objectives

The goals of the project are to:

1. Give Belgian citizens a voice in the Belgian policy on EDCs.  
*Objectives:* Organize a survey on what citizens know/expect and provide the information to Belgian policy-makers; give citizens tips on how to reduce their exposure to EDCs.
2. Formulate recommendations for the upcoming Belgian national action plan on EDCs.  
*Objectives:* Develop a position paper that showcases/outlines the state-of-the-art science and existing public policies with recommendations for policy-makers.
3. Convince other stakeholders to play a bigger role in informing citizens on the potential dangers of exposure to EDCs.  
*Objectives:* Raise awareness about the role of health professionals, like doctors and pharmacists; share best practices with health insurance funds in other countries.



### Project Overview

#### Context

At the end of 2019, the Federal and Regional Governments in Belgium decided a national action plan was needed to reduce public exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), following a report published by the Belgian Senate on the same topic in 2018. The Green Deal launched by the European Commission in 2019 further created the right incentive to put EDCs – and environmental health as a whole – on the political agenda in Belgium. For the Mutualités Libres – a group of Belgian health insurance funds with over 2 million members – these developments created the perfect momentum to bring about awareness of EDC prevention, as well as health promotion opportunities.

#### Approach

A **survey** was organized to identify what ordinary citizens know about EDCs, and how they expect policy-makers to minimize exposure. A group of 1000 people participated in the exercise, selected by a professional survey agency based on their age, gender and background. An **infographic** was developed on the results of the survey and was made available. A **second infographic** was developed together with the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) that showcases 10 concrete tips for people to reduce the exposure to EDCs in and around their home. A **position paper** (62 pages) was developed in close partnership with HEAL. Furthermore, an **online symposium** on EDC was organized on 19 November 2020, with over 400 participants from the health sector, academia, governmental agencies, national ministries and civil society (with live interpretation in three languages). For this event, the Mutualités Libres worked together with strategic partners from specialized medical press and additional nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners. A **web page** was created specifically for the event, with the infographics and the position paper published in English, French and Dutch ([https://www.mloz.be/fr/perturbateurs\\_endocriniens](https://www.mloz.be/fr/perturbateurs_endocriniens)).



## Results

- **Creating awareness:** Almost 50% of Belgians have never heard of EDCs. Another 60% do not know EDCs can have an impact on their health. A press release on these results was published and reported in the printed press, radio and television. In the Flemish Parliament, the Minister of Health had to answer parliamentary questions on the results of the survey.
- **Influencing policy-makers and setting the political agenda on EDCs:** Several proposals of the Mutualités Libres were integrated into preparatory documents concerning the Belgian national action plan on EDCs. Several meetings were organized with members of the federal and regional parliaments to present the results of the survey and resulting recommendations.
- **Convincing other stakeholders:** The Association of Belgian Pharmacists will integrate EDCs into their training programme for 2022; the Mutualités Libres will contribute to this training. A webinar in partnership with HEAL and AIM (Association Internationale de la Mutualité) was organized on 29 April 2021 to demonstrate to health insurance funds in other countries the importance of talking about EDCs.

## Lessons Learned

- The political momentum created in Belgium and the European Union as a whole by the European Green Deal has been an important facilitator and helps to keep up the pace of the project.
- Always involve citizens when it concerns their health. There are not many surveys measuring the knowledge of citizens on the often complex topic of EDCs. This kind of information can help define a policy.
- It took more time than expected to analyse this issue and to translate the findings to accessible information that citizens could understand.
- The scientific and medical expertise in this field is key, which is why the partnership with HEAL was so important.
- Concerning EDCs, there is a fine line between informing and alarming people. As a health insurance fund, the Mutualités Libres thought it would be more useful to focus on the things people can change in their daily lives instead of pointing out all the potentially dangerous chemicals surrounding them at home.
- A total of 75% of Belgians expect their doctor or pharmacist to be informed about EDCs, especially when they are part of a vulnerable group. Health professionals should not be forgotten when developing a policy on EDCs.
- It was a good call to think globally and have the documents translated into English, as it is interesting to have an exchange on this topic and to share experiences with foreign stakeholders. Because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, it was necessary to organize a digital event, but this made it possible for people outside Belgium to participate as well.

The case study was authored by the Mutualités Libres. The named authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication.

## Recommendations

*It is recommended that the involvement of health professionals be considered through a survey to measure their knowledge and obtain their opinion on EDCs. Doing so could provide more concrete input for the development of concrete policy measures.*

*A common call to action with other stakeholders might have been a strong signal to send on the importance of this issue. This is something to keep in mind for possible future steps.*

*Engagement of the industry on the national level on the issue of EDC is recommended. This project mainly focused on health and the stakeholders involved in the health-care sector (health insurance funds, health professionals, patient organizations, NGOs, etc.). Industry and agriculture sectors were not included in the scope of the project (although some recommendations concern them indirectly); therefore, their input is missing. This is something to keep in mind for possible next steps.*

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