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Fate & Transport of Emerging Contaminants

Shivam Yadav[1], Rajendra Tyagi[2], Mansi Gupta[3]
Associate Professor[1], Students[2, 3]
Department of Civil Engineering
Bhabha Institute of Technology
Email ID: *Shivamyadav13@yahoo.com[1], rajendra100t@rediffmail.com[2], mansigupta692@gmail.com[3]*
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ABSTRACT

Emerging contaminants (ECs), including pharmaceuticals, personal care products, endocrine-disrupting chemicals, and nanomaterials, are increasingly detected in water, soil, and air due to rapid urbanization, industrialization, and widespread chemical usage. Their low concentrations, persistent nature, and potential ecotoxicological effects make them a growing environmental concern. This review explores the ***fate and transport mechanisms*** *of emerging contaminants in terrestrial and aquatic environments, emphasizing the chemical, physical, and biological processes influencing their distribution. It also discusses analytical detection methods, modeling approaches, and mitigation strategies. Understanding the behavior of ECs in environmental compartments is essential for effective risk assessment and designing remediation technologies.*

KEYWORDS: *Emerging contaminants; Fate; Transport; Pharmaceuticals; Endocrine-disrupting chemicals; Environmental modeling; Remediation*

INTRODUCTION

Emerging contaminants are chemicals that are **not commonly monitored in the environment** but have potential risks to human health and ecosystems. They include **pharmaceuticals, personal care products, industrial chemicals, hormones, pesticides, and microplastics**. Unlike traditional pollutants such as heavy metals or nitrates, ECs often occur at **trace levels (ng/L to µg/L)** but exhibit high biological activity, persistence, and bioaccumulation potential.

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The occurrence of ECs is associated with urbanization, agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and wastewater discharge. Their **fate and transport in the environment** are influenced by multiple factors including chemical structure, environmental conditions, and interactions with biotic and abiotic components.

This paper reviews current knowledge on ECs, focusing on:

- Types and sources
- Environmental fate
- Transport mechanisms in water, soil, and air
- Modeling and analytical methods
- Case studies and remediation strategies

SOURCES AND TYPES OF EMERGING CONTAMINANTS

Emerging contaminants (ECs) encompass a wide variety of chemicals that are **not yet fully regulated** but have increasing evidence of ecological and human health risks. Their sources are diverse, often stemming from **human activities, industrial processes, agriculture, and consumer products**.

Understanding the types and origins of ECs is essential to trace their pathways into the environment and design effective mitigation strategies.

Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products (PPCPs)

Pharmaceuticals and personal care products are among the most studied ECs because of their **ubiquitous use** and **biologically active nature**. Pharmaceuticals include **antibiotics, analgesics, anti-inflammatories, antiepileptics, antidepressants, and hormones**, while personal care products include **cosmetics, sunscreens, fragrances, antiseptics, and detergents**.

Pathways into the environment:

- **Excretion:** Many pharmaceuticals are excreted unmetabolized or as active metabolites in urine and feces. For instance, up to 90% of some antibiotics may enter sewage systems unchanged.
- **Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs):** Conventional WWTPs are not designed to completely remove PPCPs. Compounds such as **triclosan, carbamazepine, and**

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ibuprofen often persist in treated effluents.

- **Improper Disposal:** Unused or expired medications discarded into sinks or toilets contribute directly to environmental contamination.
- **Agricultural Use:** Veterinary drugs in livestock farming, especially antibiotics and hormones, can reach soil and water via manure or runoff.

Environmental implications:

- Development of **antibiotic-resistant bacteria** in water and soil ecosystems.
- Disruption of aquatic organisms' hormonal balance due to hormones and synthetic steroids.
- Bioaccumulation in aquatic food webs, even at nanogram to microgram per liter concentrations.

Examples of detected PPCPs in water systems:

- **Antibiotics:** Sulfamethoxazole, Ciprofloxacin
- **Painkillers/NSAIDs:** Ibuprofen, Diclofenac
- **Hormones:** Estradiol, Ethinylestradiol
- **Personal care chemicals:** Triclosan, Parabens

Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs)

Endocrine-disrupting chemicals interfere with the normal hormonal functions of humans and wildlife, often **mimicking or blocking natural hormones** even at very low concentrations (ng/L). EDCs are a major concern because they can lead to **reproductive, developmental, and metabolic abnormalities** in organisms.

Common EDCs and sources:

- **Bisphenol A (BPA):** Found in plastics, epoxy resins, and food packaging. BPA can leach into water from landfills and industrial discharge.
- **Phthalates:** Used as plasticizers in PVC products, toys, and medical tubing; they leach into water and soil under environmental stress.
- **Synthetic hormones:** Often from contraceptives and livestock treatments; estrogenic compounds from human excretion are detected in rivers globally.
- **Pesticides with endocrine activity:** Atrazine, DDT, and other organochlorine compounds, which enter water via agricultural runoff.

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Environmental pathways:

- **Surface water:** Runoff from agricultural fields and urban areas.
- **Groundwater:** Leaching through soils, especially in regions with shallow water tables.
- **Sediment adsorption:** Lipophilic EDCs bind to sediments, creating long-term reservoirs in aquatic ecosystems.

Impacts on wildlife:

- Feminization of male fish due to estrogenic compounds.
- Reduced fertility in amphibians exposed to low-dose endocrine disruptors.
- Bioaccumulation along the food chain.

Nanomaterials

Nanomaterials (NMs) are **engineered particles with sizes below 100 nm**, giving them unique **chemical reactivity, optical, and mechanical properties**. They are increasingly used in consumer goods, industrial catalysts, electronics, and medicine.

Common nanomaterials:

- **Silver nanoparticles (AgNPs):** Antimicrobial agents in textiles and coatings.
- **Titanium dioxide nanoparticles (TiO_2 NPs):** Sunscreens, paints, and photocatalysts.
- **Carbon-based nanomaterials:** Carbon nanotubes, graphene, used in electronics and composites.

Environmental pathways:

- **Wastewater:** Nanoparticles can enter aquatic systems from washing textiles or industrial effluents.
- **Atmosphere:** Airborne nanoparticles can deposit onto soil and water surfaces.
- **Soil/sediment:** Due to aggregation, NMs may settle in sediments but still undergo transformations affecting mobility.

Environmental implications:

- Nanoparticles can **generate reactive oxygen species (ROS)**, causing oxidative stress in aquatic organisms.
- Can alter microbial communities, affecting natural biodegradation processes.
- Potential to **adsorb and transport other pollutants**, serving as contaminant vectors.

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Other Emerging Contaminants

Beyond PPCPs, EDCs, and nanomaterials, other emerging contaminants are of growing concern due to their **persistence and widespread use**:

1. **Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS):**

- Include PFOA, PFOS, and newer short-chain variants.
- Used in firefighting foams, non-stick cookware, textiles, and coatings.
- **Highly resistant to biodegradation**; termed "forever chemicals."

2. **Flame Retardants:**

- Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs) used in furniture, electronics, and textiles.
- Leach into the environment during product aging and disposal.

3. **Microplastics:**

- Result from **fragmentation of larger plastics** or directly from consumer products (e.g., exfoliating beads).
- Transported via **rivers to oceans**, ingested by aquatic life, and incorporated into sediments.

Environmental significance:

- PFAS accumulate in **drinking water and food chains**, posing chronic health risks.
- Flame retardants can **bioaccumulate in wildlife**, affecting reproduction and immune response.
- Microplastics act as **vectors for other ECs**, adsorbing pollutants and facilitating their transport in aquatic systems.

Table 1: Common Types of Emerging Contaminants and Sources

Contaminant Type	Examples	Primary Sources
Pharmaceuticals	Antibiotics, Analgesics	WWTPs, hospitals, livestock farms
Personal Care Products	Sunscreens, Fragrances	Domestic wastewater, cosmetics
EDCs	BPA, Phthalates	Plastics, industrial effluents
Nanomaterials	AgNPs, TiO_2 NPs	Consumer products, industrial waste

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Contaminant Type	Examples	Primary Sources
PFAS	PFOA, PFOS	Firefighting foam, industrial discharge
Microplastics	PET, Polypropylene	Plastics waste, synthetic fibers

ENVIRONMENTAL FATE OF EMERGING CONTAMINANTS

The environmental fate of emerging contaminants (ECs) is determined by the **interplay of chemical, biological, and physical processes** in soil, water, and air. These processes dictate the **persistence, mobility, bioavailability, and toxicity** of ECs. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for predicting contaminant behavior, environmental risk, and designing mitigation strategies.

1. Chemical Processes

Chemical transformations significantly influence the **degradation or persistence** of ECs in the environment.

1. Hydrolysis

Hydrolysis involves the **reaction of water molecules with chemical bonds** in ECs, leading to degradation into simpler or less active compounds.

- **Mechanism:** Ester, amide, and carbamate groups in pharmaceuticals are particularly susceptible.

Example:

- Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) undergoes hydrolysis to salicylic acid in aqueous environments.
- Certain antibiotics, like **penicillins**, hydrolyze to inactive forms under neutral or alkaline pH conditions.

- **Environmental relevance:** Hydrolysis reduces the active concentration of ECs in aquatic systems but may produce **metabolites with unknown toxicity**.

2. Photodegradation

Photodegradation occurs when **solar radiation (UV or visible light)** initiates chemical transformations in ECs.

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- **Mechanism:** Absorption of photons excites molecules, leading to bond cleavage, oxidation, or formation of radicals.

Examples:

- **Hormones:** Estradiol and ethinylestradiol undergo UV-induced breakdown in surface waters.
- **Antibiotics:** Sulfamethoxazole and tetracycline degrade under sunlight exposure.

Factors affecting photodegradation:

- Light intensity and wavelength
- Water depth and turbidity
- Presence of photosensitizers such as dissolved organic matter

3. Redox Reactions

Redox processes in soils, sediments, and water influence the **oxidation state, solubility, and reactivity** of ECs.

- **Oxidation:** Compounds like triclosan can be oxidized by natural oxidants (e.g., ozone, chlorine) in water.
- **Reduction:** Nitroaromatic pharmaceuticals or halogenated compounds may be reduced under **anaerobic conditions** in sediments or groundwater.
- **Environmental impact:** Redox-driven transformations can **detoxify ECs** or sometimes form more persistent or toxic by-products.

Biological Processes

Microbial and organism-mediated processes play a central role in the fate of ECs, particularly in **natural attenuation**.

1. Biodegradation

Microorganisms can metabolize ECs through enzymatic processes, converting them to less toxic compounds or mineralizing them into CO_2 and water.

Factors influencing biodegradation:

- Microbial diversity and population density
- Temperature, pH, and nutrient availability

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- Chemical structure and functional groups of the contaminant

Examples:

- **Caffeine, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen** are highly biodegradable.
- **PFAS and certain fluorinated compounds** are extremely resistant to microbial degradation.
- **Significance:** Biodegradation is a key **natural attenuation process**, but slow degradation of persistent ECs may lead to accumulation.

2. Bioaccumulation

Lipophilic ECs have a tendency to **partition into biological tissues**, accumulating in organisms over time.

- **Mechanism:** Compounds with high octanol-water partition coefficients (log $K_o w > 3$) are prone to accumulation in fat tissues.

Examples:

- Triclosan, certain flame retardants (PBDEs), and hydrophobic pesticides bioaccumulate in aquatic organisms.
- **Ecological implication:** Bioaccumulated ECs can **magnify through trophic levels**, impacting predators, including humans.

Physical Processes

Physical processes influence the **mobility, availability, and distribution** of ECs in the environment.

1. Sorption/Desorption

Sorption refers to the **binding of contaminants to solid surfaces**, such as soil particles, sediments, and organic matter.

- **Mechanism:** Hydrophobic interactions, ionic bonding, and van der Waals forces mediate adsorption.

Factors affecting sorption:

- Hydrophobicity (log $K_o w$): Higher log $K_o w$ = stronger sorption

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- Soil organic carbon content
- pH, ionic strength, and presence of competing ions

- **Environmental implication:** Sorption reduces the **mobility of ECs**, retaining them in sediments or soils, but desorption can release them under changing environmental conditions.

2. Volatilization

Volatilization involves the transfer of ECs from **aqueous or solid phases into the atmosphere**.

Examples:

- Fragrances and certain solvents in personal care products evaporate from water surfaces.
- Volatilization is minor for hydrophilic ECs but significant for volatile organics.

- **Environmental impact:** Volatilization can **redistribute contaminants**, depositing them elsewhere via precipitation or dry deposition, creating a pathway for long-range transport.

TRANSPORT MECHANISMS

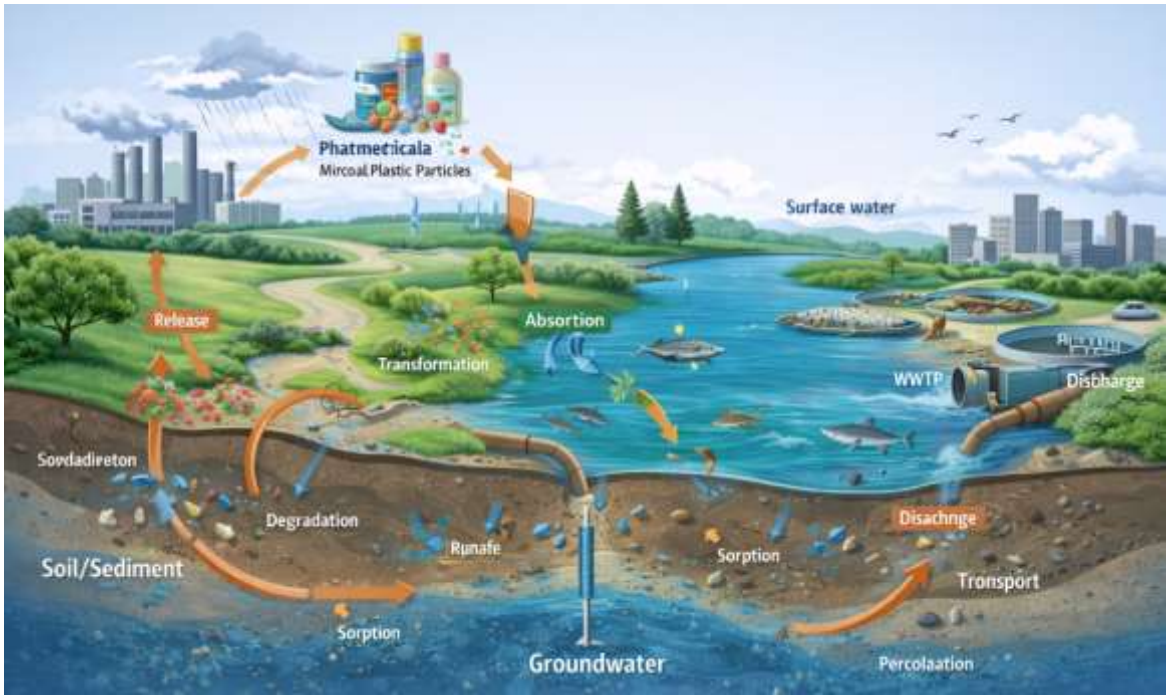


Figure 1: Fate Process of Emerging Contaminants in Enviornment

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The transport of emerging contaminants (ECs) in the environment determines **their spatial distribution, exposure risk, and persistence** in ecosystems. Transport is influenced by the chemical properties of the contaminant, the physical characteristics of the environmental medium, and external factors like climate and human activity. Major transport pathways include **aquatic systems, soil and sediments, and the atmosphere**.

Aquatic Transport

Aquatic transport encompasses the movement of ECs in **surface water (rivers, lakes, reservoirs) and groundwater systems**. Contaminants can migrate due to water flow, molecular diffusion, and interactions with suspended particles.

Key transport mechanisms:

1. **Advection** – the movement of ECs with the bulk flow of water.
- Dependent on water flow velocity and hydraulic gradient.
- In rivers, ECs are carried downstream at velocities similar to the current.
- Example: Pharmaceuticals like **ibuprofen** move with river flow from WWTP effluents to downstream reservoirs.

2. **Dispersion** – spreading of ECs due to velocity variations and turbulence in the water body.
- Leads to dilution and mixing of contaminants across the flow path.
- Important in rivers, estuaries, and coastal regions with varying flow patterns.

3. **Diffusion** – molecular movement from areas of high concentration to low concentration.
- Significant in stagnant or slow-moving waters and in microenvironments like biofilms.

4. **Sorption to suspended solids** – hydrophobic ECs may adsorb onto particles like clay, organic matter, or sediments.
- Reduces aqueous mobility but facilitates **sediment-bound transport**.
- Example: Triclosan binds to particulate matter, settling in riverbeds and lakes.

5. **Degradation kinetics** – simultaneous chemical, photochemical, and biological degradation can reduce the concentration of ECs during transport.
- Fast-degrading compounds may disappear before reaching distant locations.

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- Persistent ECs (e.g., PFAS) travel long distances with minimal attenuation.

Factors influencing aquatic transport:

- Flow velocity and turbulence
- Aquifer properties (permeability, porosity)
- pH, temperature, and ionic composition
- Presence of organic matter and suspended solids

Equation (1) – Simplified advection-dispersion equation for contaminant transport in rivers:

∂C∂t+v∂C∂x=D∂2C∂x2−kC\frac{\partial C}{\partial t} + v \frac{\partial C}{\partial x} = D \frac{\partial^2 C}{\partial x^2} - k C∂t∂C+v∂x∂C=D∂x2∂2C−kC

Where:

- CCC = contaminant concentration (mg/L)
- vvv = water velocity (m/s)
- DDD = dispersion coefficient (m^2/s)
- kkk = first-order decay rate (s^{-1})
- xxx = distance along flow path (m)
- ttt = time (s)

Soil and Sediment Transport

Soil and sediment transport controls the **movement of ECs from terrestrial sources to aquatic systems** and the **long-term environmental reservoir** of contaminants.

1. **Leaching** – downward migration of water-soluble, hydrophilic ECs through the soil profile into groundwater.

- Influenced by soil texture, porosity, organic matter content, and rainfall intensity.
- Example: **Sulfamethoxazole and caffeine** leach into shallow aquifers in agricultural areas with wastewater irrigation.

2. **Runoff** – surface water flow can carry ECs from soils to rivers and lakes.

- Particularly significant during rainfall events or snowmelt.
- Runoff transports both dissolved and particulate-bound contaminants, increasing their reach.

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- Example: **Pesticides and herbicides** applied on agricultural fields enter nearby streams via runoff.

3. **Sedimentation** – hydrophobic ECs or particle-bound contaminants settle in sediments over time.
- Sediments act as **long-term sinks**, slowly releasing contaminants under changing conditions.
- Example: **PBDEs and triclosan** accumulate in river and lake sediments.

4. **Soil adsorption/desorption** – ECs may reversibly bind to soil particles, influencing their mobility.
- Strongly sorbed compounds are retained in soils but can desorb during flooding or pH changes.

Factors influencing soil and sediment transport:
- Soil composition (clay vs. sand)
- Organic carbon content
- Soil pH and ionic strength
- Rainfall intensity and duration

Atmospheric Transport

Some ECs, particularly **volatile organic compounds and semi-volatile chemicals**, can **evaporate from water or soil surfaces**, disperse in the atmosphere, and redeposit elsewhere.

Mechanisms:
1. **Volatilization** – transfer from liquid or solid phases to the air.
- Compounds with high Henry's law constant (H) volatilize more readily.
- Example: Fragrances, solvents, and certain pesticides.

2. **Atmospheric dispersion** – wind carries volatilized ECs over short or long distances.

3. **Deposition** – contaminants return to the surface via:
- Wet deposition (rain, snow)
- Dry deposition (particulate settling)

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Environmental relevance:

- Atmospheric transport contributes to the **global distribution of persistent pollutants**, such as **organochlorine pesticides and volatile PFAS precursors**.
- Can lead to deposition in pristine areas, including mountain lakes and polar regions, where local sources are absent.

MODELING FATE AND TRANSPORT

Modeling ECs helps predict **environmental distribution, exposure, and risk**. Common approaches include:

Multimedia Models

- Treat the environment as interconnected compartments (air, water, soil, sediment).
- Example: **Mackay's fugacity models** predict chemical distribution based on partitioning behavior.

Hydrological Models

- Integrate flow and transport in rivers, lakes, and groundwater.
- Example: **SWAT (Soil and Water Assessment Tool)** simulates contaminant runoff and leaching.

Process-Based Models

- Include chemical degradation, sorption, and microbial interactions.
- Useful for predicting long-term EC persistence in complex systems.

ANALYTICAL DETECTION METHODS

Detecting ECs at low concentrations requires **sensitive and selective methods**:

- **Liquid Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (LC-MS/MS):** Widely used for pharmaceuticals and hormones.
- **Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS):** Used for volatile ECs like pesticides.
- **High-Resolution Mass Spectrometry (HRMS):** Enables identification of unknown ECs.
- **Biosensors:** Emerging tools for in situ monitoring of ECs in water and soil.

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CASE STUDIES

Pharmaceutical Pollution in Urban Rivers (India)

A study in a mid-sized Indian city detected **antibiotics (ciprofloxacin, sulfamethoxazole)** in surface water downstream of WWTPs at concentrations of 50–200 ng/L. High sorption to sediments limited downstream transport, but persistent levels were observed in groundwater near landfill sites.

PFAS Contamination in North America

PFAS, used in firefighting foams, contaminated both surface water and groundwater near airports. Due to **high chemical stability and low biodegradability**, PFAS remained in aquifers for decades, necessitating advanced remediation methods like **granular activated carbon (GAC) filtration**.

Nanoparticles in Aquatic Systems

Silver nanoparticles from consumer products have been detected in rivers and wastewater effluents. Studies show **aggregation and sedimentation** reduce mobility, but bioaccumulation in aquatic organisms poses ecological risks.

MITIGATION AND REMEDIATION STRATEGIES

Advanced Wastewater Treatment

- **Ozonation:** Breaks down pharmaceuticals and EDCs.
- **Activated Carbon Adsorption:** Removes hydrophobic ECs efficiently.
- **Membrane Filtration:** Ultrafiltration or nanofiltration targets both hydrophilic and hydrophobic ECs.

Natural Attenuation

- Relies on **biodegradation, sorption, and photodegradation** in soils and sediments. Cost-effective but slow for persistent ECs.

Constructed Wetlands

- Utilize plants and microbial communities to degrade ECs. Effective for moderate concentrations of pharmaceuticals and nutrients.

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Innovative Techniques

- **Advanced oxidation processes (AOPs):** Hydroxyl radicals degrade recalcitrant ECs.
- **Electrochemical treatment:** Breaks down PFAS and pharmaceuticals.
- **Nanomaterial-based adsorbents:** High surface area materials selectively remove contaminants.

Table 2: Common Remediation Techniques for Emerging Contaminants

Technique	Target Contaminants	Advantages	Limitations
Ozonation	Pharmaceuticals, EDCs	Fast degradation	High operational cost
Activated Carbon	Hydrophobic ECs	High efficiency	Needs regeneration
Membrane Filtration	Broad spectrum	High removal	Membrane fouling
Constructed Wetlands	Pharmaceuticals, nutrients	Low cost, eco-friendly	Space-intensive
Advanced Oxidation Processes	Persistent ECs	High reactivity	Requires chemicals, energy

CONCLUSION

Emerging contaminants pose a **significant environmental challenge** due to their persistence, bioactivity, and complex transport behavior. Understanding their fate and transport in water, soil, and air is crucial for **risk assessment, regulatory frameworks, and remediation design**. Advanced analytical methods and modeling approaches have enhanced our ability to monitor and predict contaminant behavior. Integrated strategies combining **advanced wastewater treatment, natural attenuation, and innovative technologies** are essential for mitigating environmental and human health risks. Continued research on **long-term ecological impacts, combined contaminant effects, and cost-effective remediation** is necessary to address this growing environmental concern.

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