

# *Examining the effects of ontogenic microplastic transference on Culex mosquito mortality and adult weight*

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1 Examining effects of ontogenic microplastic transference on *Culex* mosquito mortality and  
2 adult weight

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21 **Abstract**

22 Microplastics (MPs) continue to proliferate and pollute aquatic and terrestrial environments  
23 globally. The impacts of MP pollution on ecosystems and their functioning remain poorly  
24 quantified, with most research hitherto focusing on marine ecosystems. There is a paucity of  
25 information on the impacts of MPs in freshwater ecosystems, despite the broad range of  
26 pathways through which MPs can proliferate and the extensive range of species which actively  
27 ingest MPs in these systems. Of particular interest are organisms that bridge aquatic and  
28 terrestrial habitats. The present study thus examines the uptake, ontogenic transference and  
29 effect of different concentrations (0, 50, 100 and 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup>) and sizes (2 and 15 µm) of  
30 polystyrene MPs between aquatic and terrestrial life stages of *Culex pipiens* complex  
31 mosquitoes. Both 2 and 15 µm MPs transferred from the aquatic larval to terrestrial adult stage  
32 of *Culex* mosquitoes, and uptake correlated tightly with initial exposure concentration.  
33 However, neither concentration nor size of MPs significantly influenced mortality rates  
34 between the aquatic larval and terrestrial adult stage. There was also no impact of MPs on the  
35 weight of emerging mosquito adults. We thus demonstrate that MPs can be transferred  
36 ontogenically through organisms with complex life histories, presenting a potential pathway  
37 for dispersal of MPs into terrestrial environments. We also show that MPs exposure does not  
38 affect mortality rates between life stages of freshwater *Culex* populations. This suggests that  
39 MPs do not impact nutritional uptakes, with unhampered development to adulthood facilitating  
40 subsequent dispersal of MPs aerially and between freshwater and terrestrial habitats.

41 Keywords: microplastics, mosquitoes, ontogenic transference, habitat transference

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## 45 **1. Introduction**

46 Microplastics (MPs) continue to proliferate in marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems,  
47 with biotic impacts frequently unknown (Sighicelli et al., 2018). Microplastic pollution has  
48 been detected from the poles to the deep ocean, and more recently in bottled drinking water  
49 (Mason et al., 2018; Wagner and Lambert, 2018). Whilst there is little doubt over the enormity  
50 of plastic and MP pollution in scale, the vast majority of research has concentrated on marine  
51 environments whilst neglecting other ecosystems (Redondo-Hasselerharm et al., 2018; Wagner  
52 and Lambert, 2018). To date there is a paucity of information on the impacts of MPs in  
53 freshwater ecosystems, despite the broad range of pathways through which MPs can proliferate  
54 (Mason et al., 2016), and the extensive range of species which actively ingest MPs in these  
55 systems (Canniff and Hoang, 2018; Imhof et al., 2016, 2013; Nel et al., 2018; Qu et al., 2018).

56 Microplastics have been defined as plastic particles of 5mm or less in size (Imhof et al., 2013;  
57 Eriksen et al., 2014). This is a broad definition as MPs manifest in a variety of forms, such as  
58 fibres, pellets and cosmetic beads, which all routinely enter the environment (Watts et al.,  
59 2014). Microplastics differ in their chemical composition, and can consist of various polymers  
60 such as polypropylene, polyethylene and polystyrene (Andrady and Neal, 2009; Rocha-Santos  
61 and Duarte, 2014). Furthermore, MPs can either be primary or secondary in origin, with the  
62 former released directly into the environment as MPs, and the latter having degraded over time  
63 to reach the MP size class (Moor, 2008; Barnes et al., 2009). Despite such inherent variation,  
64 there has been little work to compare differential impacts of the varied types of MPs on  
65 recipient organisms.

66 Movement of MPs through terrestrial and aquatic environments has been investigated, and  
67 several pathways have been suggested. For example, movement through the air due to wind  
68 (Dris et al., 2016) or directly through water courses from wastewater treatment plants into

69 rivers and eventually the marine environment (Mason et al., 2016; Wagner and Lambert, 2018).  
70 Rivers can also deliver MPs into lakes, where they can be found in high concentrations and  
71 presumably fall into the sediment (Vaughan et al., 2017). In North America the highest MP  
72 concentrations were found in Lake Ontario-Erie, with an average range of 90000 – 6700000  
73 items km<sup>-2</sup> (Fischer et al., 2016). In Europe, Lake Geneva contained the highest MP  
74 concentration with a mean of 220000 (± SD: ± 160000 items km<sup>-2</sup>) (Eriksen et al., 2013), and in  
75 Asia, Lake Taihu contained a range of 10000 – 6800000 items km<sup>-2</sup> (Su et al., 2016).

76 Given the densities of MPs in freshwater ecosystems, it is likely that they will be ingested by  
77 aquatic organisms, and, in turn, probable that they will be transferred up through the food chain  
78 (Cole et al., 2013; Sussarellu et al., 2016; Scherer et al., 2017; Redondo-Hasselerharm et al.  
79 2018). Laboratory experiments have demonstrated the uptake of MPs, and it is well established  
80 that they are ingested by many invertebrates in both freshwater and marine environments  
81 (Imhof et al., 2013; Al-Jaibachi and Callaghan, 2018). However, considerations of whether  
82 MPs can be transmitted by means of ontogenic transference, i.e. between life stages within an  
83 individual, have remained scarce. Insects comprise an important component of freshwater  
84 environments and are often highly abundant (Macadam and Stockan, 2015). Many insects have  
85 complex life histories, consisting of successive aquatic and terrestrial stages. Examples of such  
86 insects are stoneflies, damselflies, midges and mosquitoes, most of which are eaten by birds in  
87 their terrestrial stage. We have recently shown that MPs can be transferred into mosquito adults  
88 following ingestion as larvae (Al-Jaibachi et al., 2018). Thus, ontogenic transference of MPs  
89 presents a further pathway for MPs to enter new ecosystems from aquatic environments, with  
90 the potential to enter organisms that do not feed on the aquatic stages of freshwater or marine  
91 organisms.

92 The present study was undertaken to determine whether MPs which transfer between insect  
93 life stages of species with complex life histories could affect survival and adult size, which is

94 linked to fecundity (Takken et al., 2013). Mosquitoes (Diptera: Culicidae) are ideal for this  
95 study since they go through four feeding larval instars, a non-feeding pupal stage and finally  
96 emerge into a flying adult that feeds on nectar and/or vertebrate blood depending on the sex  
97 and species. Here, we investigate the ingestion of  $2 \pm 0.2$  and  $15 \pm 1.1$   $\mu\text{m}$  fluorescent  
98 polystyrene beads, and whether consumption is concentration-dependent. Fluorescent beads  
99 were selected to enable MPs to be easily detected in the non-feeding stages and also to allow  
100 an investigation of location within the body during metamorphosis. *Culex pipiens* complex  
101 mosquitoes were selected for this study because they exhibit a global distribution and colonise  
102 a broad range of aquatic habitats, such as stream pools, lake edges, marshes and shallow  
103 permanent ponds, alongside both natural (phytotelmata) and artificial containers (Townroe and  
104 Callaghan, 2015). The group is also known to be an important food source for birds and other  
105 terrestrial organisms in the adult stage (Dow et al., 1994). We hypothesise that: (1) MPs will  
106 move ontogenically from larval to pupal stages, and subsequently into adult mosquito stages,  
107 and that transference is both MP density- and size-dependent; (2) uptake of MPs will reduce  
108 the survivability of larval mosquitoes to the adult stage; (3) exposure to MPs will affect the  
109 nutrition and thus development of larval mosquitoes, resulting in smaller-sized adults upon  
110 emergence.

## 111 **2. Materials and methods**

### 112 *2.1. Preparation of microplastics (MPs)*

113 Two types of MPs were used: a  $2 \pm 0.2$   $\mu\text{m}$  fluorescent yellow-green carboxylate-modified  
114 polystyrene (density  $1.050 \text{ g cm}^{-3}$ , excitation 470 nm, emission 505 nm; Sigma-Aldrich, UK)  
115 and a  $15.45 \pm 1.1$   $\mu\text{m}$  fluorescent dragon green polystyrene (density  $1.06 \text{ g cm}^{-3}$ , excitation 480  
116 nm, emission 520 nm; Bangs Laboratories Inc., USA).

117 The 2  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs were stored as a stock suspension ( $2.5 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ ) in distilled water and mixed  
118 using a vortex (Whirlimixe Cyclon, UK) prior to dilutions. The 15  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs were also stored  
119 as stock suspension (1 % solid) polystyrene microspheres. Particles were washed prior to use  
120 by adding 1 mL from the stock solution into a 1.5 mL Eppendorf tube and then centrifuging at  
121 9000 rpm for 10 min. The supernatant was discarded and 1 mL of distilled water was added.  
122 The solution was then resuspended by using the vortex and centrifuged again at the same speed  
123 and duration. This process was repeated two more times.

## 124 2.2. *Mosquito colonies*

125 Larvae of the *C. pipiens* mosquito complex were obtained from colonies reared at the  
126 University of Reading, UK following the methodology of Cuthbert et al. (2018). This colony  
127 originated from individuals collected in Cyprus in 2005 by Dr A. Callaghan and have been  
128 reared in laboratory conditions since then. Adult *C. pipiens* were fed overnight twice a week  
129 with defibrinated horse blood (TCS Biosciences, UK) using artificial membrane feeder  
130 (Hemotek, UK). Cotton pads soaked in 10 % sucrose solution were provided for additional  
131 sustenance.

## 132 2.3. *Experimental protocols*

133 We exposed *C. pipiens* larvae to one of two MP sizes (2 and 15  $\mu\text{m}$ ) under one of four  
134 concentrations (0, 50, 100 and 200 MP  $\text{mL}^{-1}$ ) in a crossed design in the same laboratory where  
135 the colonies are maintained ( $25 \pm 2 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , RH  $70 \pm 5 \%$ , 16:8 light:dark) for 12 days. In each of  
136 five replicates per treatment group, ten third instar *C. pipiens* larvae were placed in a glass  
137 beaker ( $60 \times 80 \text{ mm}$ ) filled with 120 mL of tap water and 100 mg of pelleted guinea pig food  
138 for sustenance. Treatments were assigned randomly to a position on the laboratory bench to



139 reduce experimental error. Microplastic concentrations were quantified at the start and the end  
140 of the experiment by taking  $5 \times 1$  mL from different points of each beaker (Table S1).

#### 141 *2.4. Uptake and ontogenic transference*

142 One individual was randomly removed from each beaker once all mosquitoes in the beaker had  
143 moulted into the 4<sup>th</sup> instar, and again when they pupated or emerged as adults. All samples  
144 were then washed twice with distilled water to remove MPs from the surface of the mosquito  
145 and placed in separate 1.5 mL Eppendorf tubes, before being stored at -20 °C prior to  
146 examination.

147 Microplastics were extracted from mosquitoes by homogenization and filtration. Mosquitoes  
148 were homogenized using a glass pestle in Eppendorf tubes containing 500  $\mu$ L distilled water.  
149 Individuals treated with 2  $\mu$ m MPs were filtered through a nucleopore track-etched membrane  
150 (Whatman, UK) of < 1  $\mu$ m and 25 mm dia.. Those exposed to 15  $\mu$ m MPs were filtered through  
151 a nucleopore track-etched membrane (Whatman, UK) of < 10  $\mu$ m and 25 mm dia. using a glass  
152 vacuum filter holder connected to a manual air pump. The MPs captured by both filters were  
153 quantified under a 20  $\times$  epi-fluorescent microscope (Zeiss Axioskop, USA). Adults were  
154 further dissected under a binocular stereo microscope (0.7  $\times$  – 4.5  $\times$ ) to extract the gut and  
155 quantify the numbers of MPs under the epi-fluorescent microscope (Coleman et al., 2007).

#### 156 *2.5. Mortality rates*

157 Mortality of successive stages was monitored and recorded daily over the course of the 12 day  
158 experimental period. We thus deduced overall proportional survival to the adult mosquito stage  
159 in *C. pipiens*.

#### 160 *2.6. Emerging adult weights*

161 Emerging adult mosquitoes from each treatment were weighed using a microbalance (Thermo  
162 Cahn, USA), then examined under the epi-fluorescent microscope to ensure that no MPs were  
163 attached to the body.

## 164 2.7. Statistical methods

165 All data were analyzed using the statistical software R v3.4.2 (R Development Core Team,  
166 2017). Quantities of MPs in larval, pupal and adult *Culex* mosquito stages were analysed  
167 separately using generalised linear models (GLMs) assuming a quasi-Poisson error distribution  
168 as counts were found to be overdispersed compared to degrees of freedom. Microplastics were  
169 absent from all control groups, and so we excluded this treatment from statistical analyses here.  
170 The effects of MPs on proportioned survival of *Culex* from the larval to the adult stage were  
171 then analysed separately using GLMs assuming a quasi-binomial error distribution. Then, the  
172 effects of MP treatments on adult weights were analysed using ANOVA following log10  
173 transformation to meet normality and homoscedasticity assumptions (Shapiro-Wilk test,  $p >$   
174  $0.05$ ; Bartlett's test,  $p > 0.05$ ). In all models, we initially incorporated 'concentration' and 'MP  
175 size' of MPs as explanatory variables factorially. We then performed backward stepwise  
176 deletion of insignificant terms and interactions to facilitate the most parsimonious model fits  
177 (Crawley, 2007). We performed *post hoc* Tukey's comparisons where terms significantly  
178 affected a response variable at the 95 % confidence level (Lenth, 2016).

## 179 3. Results

180 No MPs were found in control group replicates. Microplastics of both sizes were found in  
181 larval, pupal and adult life stages of mosquitoes, however abundances were strongly related to  
182 initial exposure concentration and MP size at each ontogenic stage. Abundance of MPs in larval  
183 mosquitoes was significantly influenced by initial exposure concentrations ( $F_{(2, 27)} = 84.55, p <$   
184  $0.001$ ), with quantities of MPs significantly higher across all increasing concentration

185 increments (all  $p < 0.001$ ; Figure 1a), and abundances up to a maximum of 255.8 ( $\pm$  SD:  $\pm 8.7$ )  
186 MP larva<sup>-1</sup>. Significantly greater quantities of 2  $\mu$ m MPs were found in larval *C. pipiens* than  
187 15  $\mu$ m MPs ( $F_{(1, 26)} = 28.53, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effect  
188 between ‘concentration’ and ‘MP size’ ( $F_{(2, 24)} = 6.44, p = 0.006$ ), reflecting emergent effects  
189 between the variables (Figure 1a). Whilst there were no significant differences in MP quantities  
190 in *Culex* larvae at 50 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> or 100 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> between the two MP size classes (both  $p >$   
191 0.05), uptake of the smaller 2  $\mu$ m MPs was significantly higher at concentrations of 200 MPs  
192 mL<sup>-1</sup> than 15  $\mu$ m MPs at the same concentration ( $p < 0.001$ ).

193 For pupae, exposure concentration also had a significant effect on MP abundance in *C. pipiens*  
194 ( $F_{(2, 27)} = 4.56, p = 0.02$ ), with abundances up to a maximum of 54.8 ( $\pm$  SD:  $\pm 54.2$ ) MP pupa<sup>-1</sup>.  
195 Whilst there were similarities in uptake between 50 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> vs 100 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> ( $p = 0.31$ ),  
196 and 100 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> vs 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> ( $p = 0.28$ ), MP abundances in pupae were significantly  
197 greater at 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> compared to 50 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> ( $p = 0.01$ ). Moreover, significantly lower  
198 quantities of 15  $\mu$ m MPs were found in pupae as compared to 2  $\mu$ m MPs ( $F_{(1, 26)} = 133.25, p <$   
199 0.001; Figure 1b), and this effect was consistent across exposure concentrations as there was  
200 no significant ‘concentration  $\times$  MPs size’ interaction effect ( $F_{(2, 24)} = 0.87, p = 0.43$ ).

201 Microplastics were detected in the adult stage of *C. pipiens* mosquitoes, and MP abundance  
202 was significantly greater under increasing initial MP exposure concentrations overall ( $F_{(2, 27)} =$   
203 14.07,  $p < 0.001$ ) and for 2  $\mu$ m MP compared to 15  $\mu$ m MP ( $F_{(1, 26)} = 4.71, p = 0.04$ ). However,  
204 we found no incidence of MP transfer at 50 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> to adults across treatments, whilst MPs  
205 were transferred to adults at 2  $\mu$ m MP concentrations exceeding 100 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup>, and 15  $\mu$ m  
206 MP concentrations of 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup> (Figure 1c). There were similarities across the  
207 ‘concentration’ and ‘MPs size’ interaction here ( $F_{(2, 24)} = 2.09, p = 0.15$ ).

208 Survival to the adult stage was not significantly affected by MP concentration ( $F_{(3, 36)} = 0.78$ ,  $p$   
209  $= 0.52$ ; Figure 2) or by MP size ( $F_{(1, 35)} = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.58$ ). There was no significant  
210 ‘concentration  $\times$  MP size’ interaction effect on survival to the adult stage ( $F_{(3, 32)} = 2.60$ ,  $p =$   
211  $0.07$ ).

212 Exposure concentration of MPs did not have a significant effect on the weight of adult *C.*  
213 *pipiens* mosquitoes ( $F_{(3, 36)} = 1.46$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ), and weight was not significantly influenced by  
214 MP size used during exposure ( $F_{(1, 35)} = 0.76$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ; Figure 3). Similarities were observed  
215 for the interaction between ‘concentration’ and ‘MP size’ on the weight of adult *C. pipiens*  
216 following exposure to MPs ( $F_{(3, 32)} = 0.48$ ,  $p = 0.71$ ).

#### 217 **4. Discussion**

218 Microplastic pollution has increased concurrently in the aquatic environment with human  
219 population growth (Rocha-Santos and Duarte, 2014), alongside the high production and  
220 consumption of plastic materials (Andrady and Neal, 2009). Investigations have shown that the  
221 freshwater environment, including rivers, lakes and streams, contain substantial levels of  
222 microplastic pollution, with biotic impacts largely unquantified and pathways for MP dispersal  
223 poorly understood (Horton et al., 2017; Wagner and Lambert, 2018). The present study  
224 demonstrates the potential for MPs to move ontogenically from feeding larval *C. pipiens*  
225 mosquito complex stages, into non-feeding pupal stages, and subsequently into flying adult  
226 stages. We also show density- and size-dependence of MP uptake, with greater numbers of  
227 particles taken up where MP concentrations were higher, and MP sizes were smaller. Here,  
228 MPs did not significantly influence the survival of larval mosquitoes to the adult stage, and the  
229 size of adults was not significantly influenced by prior MP exposure.

230 It was no surprise to discover that mosquitoes readily ingested MPs. Larvae of *Aedes aegypti*  
231 (Linnaeus), *Anopheles albimanus* Wiedemann, *Anopheles quadrimaculatus* Say and *Culex*

232 *quinquefasciatus* Say have all been shown previously to ingest polystyrene latex beads (Dadd,  
233 1971; Aly, 1988). We show that larvae did not ingest as many of the larger 15  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs  
234 compared to 2  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs which confirms previous work that suggests that filter feeding  
235 mosquitoes ingest particles based on their own size (Merritt et al., 1992), This does not infer  
236 selection, but probably reflects physical limitations, for example first instar larvae are unable  
237 to ingest latex beads as small as 45  $\mu\text{m}$  in diameter (Dadd, 1971). Mosquito larvae feed using  
238 lateral palatal brushes to generate a current that causes water containing food or MPs to  
239 approach the mouth (Merritt et al., 1992) and it is possible that either the current or the mouth  
240 are not capable of easily dealing with larger fragments. However, MP ingestion at earlier life  
241 stages is not relevant for MPs to be passed ontogenically into the adult stage; it is only  
242 necessary for the fourth instar to ingest the plastic.

243 Both 2 and 15  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs were transferred from a feeding (larval) into a non-feeding (pupal) life  
244 stage and subsequently into the flying (adult) life stage during metamorphosis. Generally,  
245 where MPs were presented at higher concentrations, greater numbers of MPs were taken up by  
246 larval mosquitoes, and this differential abundance was sustained throughout their ontogenic  
247 development. Although MPs of both sizes were shown to transfer through to the adult stage,  
248 this transference only occurred under higher experimental concentrations (100 and 200 MPs  
249  $\text{mL}^{-1}$ ). It is difficult to compare these concentrations to those in the environment since detection  
250 is often of a mixed size group of MPs; reporting varies in units used and very small MPs are  
251 often not measured (Wagner and Lambert, 2018, de Sá et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2018).

252 As with Al-Jaibachi et al. (2018), we found that the MPs accumulated in the Malpighian tubules  
253 of adults, however the number of MPs was substantially less than the number of MPs in the  
254 two previous life stages. Given the exposure conditions of the present study, it is likely that  
255 depuration or excretion reduces MP concentrations over time between mosquito life stages,  
256 and particularly immediately post-emergence when adults evacuate their guts (Gillett, 1982).

257 We suggest that MP size is a very important factor to ontogenic transfer. Small MP sizes can  
258 transfer and accumulate faster than large MPs, and in the present study smaller 2  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs were  
259 able to transfer to the adult stage at a lower concentration than larger 15  $\mu\text{m}$  MPs.

260 The extent to which MPs can enter new environments through metamorphosing insects is  
261 closely related to plastic toxicity; if MPs have lethal effects on immature stages, then  
262 transference and dispersal by adult life stages will not be possible. There was no evidence that  
263 MPs had any significant impact on the survival rate of aquatic larval *C. pipiens* through to the  
264 terrestrial adult stage. The absence of any negative impact on the weight of emerging adults  
265 suggests that the larvae may not have suffered from a lack of nutrition during development.  
266 Similar results have been found with studies of MP ingestion in *Daphnia* (Al-Jaibachi and  
267 Callaghan, 2018; Canniff and Hoang, 2018). Mosquito larval nutrition determines the extent  
268 of metabolic reserves as well as the size of adult mosquitoes upon emergence which, in turn,  
269 has a strong impact on fitness (Takken et al., 2013). Although the exposure duration was  
270 limited given that third instar larvae were used as the starting point of the experiment, the  
271 presence of MPs did not seem to influence the overall nutritional uptake of larvae to the extent  
272 where it affected adult growth. Thus, given the sustained survivability and development in the  
273 presence of MPs, it is highly likely that mosquitoes which uptake MPs will subsequently  
274 disperse MPs aurally into terrestrial food webs from the aquatic environment.

275 In conclusion, ontogenic transference presents a pathway for MP pollution to disperse from  
276 aquatic to terrestrial environments, vectored by mobile organisms with complex life histories.  
277 The efficacy of MP transfer is, however, dependent on both MP concentration and MP size,  
278 with considerable proportions of MPs lost between larval, pupal and adult *Culex* mosquito  
279 stages. Adult weights and mortality were not impacted by MPs, and so the presence of MPs  
280 does not seem to influence the viability, development or nutritional uptake of mosquitoes.  
281 Future studies should examine the effects of MPs on ontogenic transference in other aquatic

282 insect larvae, along with a search for evidence of transference into predators. In addition,  
283 quantification of MP loss within exuviae would further elucidate the mechanism for MP  
284 reductions between ontogenic stages.

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421 Figure 1. The number of microplastics (MP) across different exposure concentrations (50, 100  
422 and 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup>) and sizes (2 and 15 µm) in (a) larval stage, (b) pupal stage and (c) adult  
423 stage *Culex pipiens*. Means are ± SE.

424 Figure 2. Mortality rates between larval and adult stage of *Culex pipiens* exposed to MPs under  
425 different concentrations (0, 50, 100 and 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup>) and of different sizes (2 and 15 µm).  
426 Means are ± SE.

427 Figure 3. Weights of emerging *Culex pipiens* adults following exposure to MPs of different  
428 concentrations (0, 50, 100 and 200 MPs mL<sup>-1</sup>) and sizes (2 and 15 µm). Means are ± SE.

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