

16 simple ways to reduce plastic waste

These easy things can dramatically decrease the amount of plastic trash you make.

LAURA MOSS 

July 29, 2015, 2:37 p.m.



Stop chewing gum and using disposable water bottles and you're on your way to making less plastic pollution. (Photo: [Plastic Pollution Coalition/flickr](#))

Plastic is found in virtually everything these days. Your food and hygiene products are packaged in it. Your car, phone and computer are made from it. And you might even chew on it daily in the form of gum. While most plastics are touted as recyclable, the reality is that they're “[downcycled](#).” A plastic milk carton can never be recycled into another carton — it can be made into a lower-quality item like plastic lumber, which can't be recycled.

How big is our plastic problem? Of the 33 million tons of plastic waste generated in the U.S. each year, [only 7 percent](#) is recycled. This plastic waste ends up in landfills, beaches, rivers and oceans and contributes to such devastating problems as the [Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch](#), a swirling vortex of garbage the size of a continent where plastic outnumbers plankton. Plus, most plastic is made from oil.

Luckily, there are simple steps you can take that will dramatically decrease the amount of plastic waste you generate.

Just say no to straws



Do you really need to sip your drink through a plastic straw? (Photo: Horia Varlan/flickr)

One of the easiest ways to keep plastic out of the landfill is to refuse plastic straws. Simply inform your waiter or waitress that you don't need one, and make sure to specify this when ordering at a drive-thru. Can't fathom giving up the convenience of straws? Purchase a reusable stainless steel or glass drinking straw. Restaurants are less likely to bring you a plastic one if they see that you've brought your own.

Use reusable produce bags



Just say "no" to plastic produce bags. (Photo: Shayan Sanyal/flickr)

About 1 million plastic bags are used every minute, and a single plastic bag can take 1,000 years to degrade. If you're already bringing reusable bags to the grocery store, you're on the right track, but if you're still using plastic produce bags, it's time to make a change. Purchase some reusable produce bags and help keep even more plastic out of the landfill. However, avoid those bags made from nylon or polyester because they're also made from plastic. Opt for cotton ones instead.

Give up gum



When you chew gum, you're actually chewing on plastic. (Photo: Cindy Funk/flickr)

Gum was originally made from [tree sap called chicle](#), a natural rubber, but when scientists created synthetic rubber, polyethylene and polyvinyl acetate began to replace the natural rubber in most gum. Not only are you chewing on plastic, but you may also be chewing on toxic plastic — polyvinyl acetate is manufactured using vinyl acetate, a chemical shown to [cause tumors in lab rats](#). While it is possible to [recycle your gum](#), it may be best to skip it — and its plastic packaging — altogether.

Buy boxes, not bottles

Buy laundry detergent and dish soap in boxes instead of plastic bottles. Cardboard can be more easily recycled and made into more products than plastic.

Buy from bulk bins

Many stores, such as Whole Foods, sell bulk food like rice, pasta, beans, nuts, cereal and granola, and opting to fill a reusable bag or container with these items will save both money and unnecessary packaging. Stores have various methods for deducting the container weight so simply check with customer service before filling your container. Also, many cotton bags have their weights printed on their tags so they can simply be deducted at the checkout.

Reuse glass containers

You can buy a variety of prepared foods in glass jars instead of plastic ones, including spaghetti sauce, peanut butter, salsa and applesauce, just to name a few. Instead of throwing these away or recycling them, reuse the jars to store food or take them with you when you're buying bulk foods. If you have plastic containers leftover from yogurt, butter or other food, don't throw them out. Simply wash them and use them to store food.

Use reusable bottles and cups



Instead of disposable water bottles, refill a reusable bottle. (Photo: Seven Depolo/flickr)

Bottled water produces 1.5 million tons of plastic waste per year, and these bottles require 47 millions gallons of oil to produce, according to [Food & Water Watch](#). By simply refilling a reusable bottle, you'll prevent some of these plastic bottles from ending up in landfills and oceans — but don't stop there. Bring a reusable cup to coffee shops and ask the barista to fill it up, and keep a mug at your desk instead of using plastic, paper or Styrofoam cups. The average American office worker uses about 500 disposable cups a year so you'll be preventing a lot of unnecessary waste.

Bring your own container

Whether you're picking up takeout or bringing home your restaurant leftovers, be prepared with your own reusable containers. When you place your order, ask if you can get the food placed in your own container. Most restaurants will have no problem with it.

Use matches

If you need to light a candle, build a campfire or start a fire for any other reason, opt for matches over disposable plastic lighters. These cheap plastic devices sit in landfills for years and have even been found in dead birds' stomachs. If you can't bear to part with your lighter, pick up a refillable metal one to help cut down on waste.

Skip the frozen foods section

Frozen foods offer both convenience and plenty of plastic packaging — even those eco-friendly packaged items made from cardboard are actually coated in a thin layer of plastic. While giving up frozen food can be difficult, there are benefits besides the

obvious environmental ones: You'll be eating fewer processed foods and avoiding the [chemicals](#) in their plastic packaging.

Don't use plasticware

Say goodbye to disposable chopsticks, knives, spoons, forks and even sporks. If you often forget to pack silverware in your lunch, or if you know your favorite restaurant only has plasticware, start keeping a set of utensils. It's sure to reduce your carbon forkprint.

Return reusable containers



Berry and tomato containers are refillable. Take them back to the market with you. (Photo: ilovebutter/flickr)

If you buy berries or cherry tomatoes at the farmers market, simply bring the plastic containers to the market when you need a refill. You can even ask your local grocer to take the containers back and reuse them.

Use cloth diapers

According to the EPA, 7.6 billion pounds of disposable diapers are discarded in the U.S. each year. Plus, it takes about 80,000 pounds of plastic and more than 200,000 trees a year to manufacture disposable diapers for American babies alone. By simply switching to cloth diapers, you'll not only reduce your baby's carbon footprint, you'll also save money.

Don't buy juice

Instead of buying juice in plastic bottles, make your own fresh-squeezed juice or simply eat fresh fruit. Not only does this cut down on plastic waste, but it's also better for you because you'll be getting more vitamins and antioxidants and less high fructose corn syrup.

Clean green



With a few simple changes, you don't have to contribute to this sea of plastic trash. (Photo: Horia Varlan/flickr)

There's no need for multiple plastic bottles of tile cleaner, toilet cleaner and window cleaner if you have a few basics on hand like baking soda and vinegar. So free up some space, save some cash, and avoid those toxic chemicals by making your own cleaning products.

- [Cheap and natural cleaning alternatives](#)
- [Green cleaning tips](#)
- [Make your own housecleaning products](#)
- [Green residential cleaning](#)

Pack a lunch the right way

If your lunchbox is full of disposable plastic containers and sandwich bags, it's time to make a change. Instead of packing snacks and sandwiches in bags, put them in reusable containers you have at home, or try lunch accessories like [reusable snack bags](#). You can also opt for fresh fruit instead of single-serving fruit cups, and buy items like yogurt and pudding in bulk and simply put a portion in a reusable dish for lunch.

Copyright © 2018 NARRATIVE CONTENT GROUP. All rights reserved.