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Stop Plastic Pollution at the Source. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle!

We use plastics in virtually every shape and form in our daily lives. It carries our drinks, holds our shampoos, and keeps our veggies fresh. According to the to the [UN Environment Programme](#), humans are consuming resources and producing waste at a greater scale than ever before, and per capita consumption levels are projected to increase with continued development. Data indicates that during the 20th century, global material resource use rose at about twice the rate of population. Plastic is everywhere! We love it because it is waterproof, relatively cheap, durable, and versatile. Plastic makes our lives incredibly convenient, disposable, and easy, but most people rarely think about the effects it has on the environment. Unlike other materials, it never really goes away. Plastic does break down, but in a landfill it takes up to [400](#) hundreds years; worse, it doesn't ever become other materials, it just breaks into



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microscopic pieces of plastic that are still non-biodegradable. From there, plastic fragments most often find their way into the oceans. But it's not just the end of a plastic's life cycle we need to worry about. When plastic is produced, it's made from toxic materials such as **benzene** and **vinyl hydrochloride**. These chemicals are known to cause cancer, and the manufacturing byproducts contaminate our air and soil.



So what can you do?

Stop plastic pollution at the source.

We all know the phrase reduce, reuse, recycle, and it's common knowledge that these steps are generally good for the environment. What you might not know is that the order of those words has meaning as well. The words are in order of greatest impact in lowering your carbon footprint, reduce being the most important. If you want to reduce the harmful effects of plastic pollution, follow the hierarchy of steps and tips below.

The first step; reduce.

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The most effective way to reduce plastic pollution is to not create plastics in the first place. Reduce and refuse! Sure, it's great to recycle a plastic water bottle after you are done with it. But it's MUCH better to never use it in the first place, eliminating the extraction of materials from the earth, energy used to manufacture it, and fuels to transport it to wherever it will be sold. Each child who brings non-reusable bags for lunch to school every day generates **67 pounds** of waste each year. Try to keep this most important step in mind every day!

You might be surprised on how little thought you devote to your plastic use. The straw in your water at a sit-down restaurant, your deodorant tube, extra plastic bags for your produce, and even the plastic wrap your sandwich comes in can be avoided with enough planning, or simply just asking to skip the plastic packaging. Also be aware of hidden plastics you can avoid, such as microbeads in facewash! You can also reduce your plastic usage by simply buying bulk! Instead of needing two bottles of shampoo a month, buy a larger bottle and reduce the overall packaging by only purchasing one.

Be mindful of what you are using and where it is going after you are finished with it, and look for products that use less packaging. Voting with your wallet by picking products that utilize less plastic encourages manufacturers to follow the dollars and reduce their plastic use. This is your power as a consumer!

The second step; reuse.

If you are like most people, it's difficult to make it through your day without acquiring some form of plastic! That's where reuse

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comes in. Once the plastic is in your possession, it is your chance to be creative and find different usages for it. Reuse plastic produce bags for sandwiches, plastic grocery bags for small trash bags, and re-use your plastic silverware! If you can't find a use for something, donate it! Not only will you be reducing waste, you'll be helping others. Most people skip this step and go directly to recycling, but reusing plastics can reduce the demand for new plastics to be created.

The last step, recycle.

After you have reused your plastic as many times as you can and are ready to dispose of it, choose the recycling container instead of the trash. Recycling plastic takes **less energy** than making plastic from raw materials. Sure it can be a hassle to clean your peanut butter jar to recycle it rather than tossing it in the trash, but the impact is vastly different and the choice is yours.

At this time, plastic is a fact of modern life, as is pollution derived from it. However, with a little planning, commitment, and effort, it's easy to make steps towards reducing your carbon footprint.

Remember that the biggest impact is made by avoiding plastics in the first place, if that can't be done reuse and recycling are the next best steps! Be conscious of the amount of plastic material you are using, and try to replace plastic with something more sustainable whenever possible. Reuse any plastic that you have already acquired, and recycle used plastic to keep it out of the waste stream and reduce demand for new plastic. Enough people taking these simple steps can help reduce plastic pollution and keep our planet clean and healthy for future generations.

For more on reducing your plastic use and waste, check out the following articles:

- [Top 14 Ways to Reuse your Paper and Plastic Bags](#)
- [CET Takes a Tour of the SMRF](#)
- [Tricky Trash and Risky Recycling](#)

By Willow Cohn, Outreach and Education EcoFellow '17-'18

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