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Healthy, Practical Tips for People and the Planet

by Brita Belli

Plastic is nearly impossible to avoid these days, but we should beware of its health impacts.

First, consider that the chemicals that form plastic compounds are let loose when plastic becomes worn, scratched or heated. When we use plastic containers for food and drinks and these chemicals are freed up, they can enter our food supply and contribute to a toxic buildup in our bodies. Exposure to such chemicals poses particular danger to pregnant women, babies and young children, whose hormone and brain development can be more easily affected by such toxic insults.

Next, consider that Americans annually send more than 29 million tons of plastic to landfills, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Once there, it deteriorates, yet never fully breaks down. Plastic is one of the least recycled forms of packaging, due to its myriad recycling codes and disposable convenience (consider how many of us return plastic grocery bags to the store).

Even worse, countless plastic bags, containers, six-pack rings, beverage straws and other plastic human detritus

have found their way into our oceans. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates there are currently 46,000 pieces of plastic in every square mile of ocean. Plastic garbage patches entangle, choke and kill turtles, dolphins and other sea life or, after the eroding effects of sun and saltwater, disintegrate into microscopic plastic pellets consumed by fish, which then wind up on our dinner plates.

Here are some ubiquitous plastics of concern and practical ways to avoid using them.

Plastic food storage containers.

With plastic storage containers (particularly polycarbonate plastic, with a 7 recycling number or resin identification code), the chemical bisphenol A (BPA) is of primary concern. BPA molecules are linked to form the plastic, but some molecules can escape and leach into food contents.

BPA is a known hormone disruptor that has been tied to miscarriage, prostate and breast cancer, obesity and in children, behavioral and cognitive problems. If the plastic is worn, scratched, repeatedly washed or

heated, leaching is more likely.

Alternative: Use stainless steel or glass containers that can be frozen and heated without worry.

Plastic water and soda bottles.

Flimsy plastic beverage bottles (bearing a number 1 recycling symbol) are made with polyethylene terephthalate (PET), a petroleum-based plastic that can leach antimony, a metal linked to lung disease, heart problems and stomach ulcers at high concentrations; and phthalates, a common plasticizer associated with male genital deformities, low sperm counts, early puberty, susceptibility to allergens and autism. Hot conditions (such as the inside of a car) increase the leaching potential, as can reuse.

Alternative: Invest in a few stainless steel reusable water bottles.

Plastic sandwich bags. Most plastic sandwich bags are made from low-density polyethylene (LDPE), indicated by resin code 4. Although not known to leach chemicals (it's still wise to avoid microwaving them, however), they contribute to the massive quantity of plastic waste produced each year.

Alternatives: Many reusable cloth lunch bags plus glass, bamboo and stainless steel snack containers are available.

Clear food packaging, plastic squeeze bottles and peanut butter containers. Many pre-wrapped items in the deli or produce section, as well as condiment squeeze bottles and peanut butter containers bearing a number 3 code, are made with polyvinyl chloride or PVC, one of the most dangerous plastics. During the production

of PVC, harmful chemicals like lead, dioxins and vinyl chloride are released that have been tied to health outcomes ranging from learning and behavioral problems to cancer and birth defects. Fatty foods such as cheeses and meats wrapped in number 3 plastics are particularly prone to leaching phthalates.

Alternatives: Opt for food that's not wrapped in plastic, such as meat from a butcher or deli counter, rather than pre-packaged in the refrigerated bin. Also consider switching to condiments and peanut butters packaged in glass.

Styrofoam takeout containers.

Polystyrene foam is technically a number 6 plastic. It's common in to-go containers and egg cartons, and the styrene that can leach out is tied to many health impacts, including neurological damage and harm to the liver and kidneys. Further, styrene is known to build up in body fat, increasing its toxic potential over time.

Alternatives: Shop at natural grocery stores and places where customers can bring their own containers. With egg cartons, opt for cardboard, preferably made from recycled material.

Brita Belli is the editor of E-The Environmental Magazine.

Find green home kitchenware at Natural Awakenings' online store, NAWebstore.com.

Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, epa.gov; United Nations Environment Programme, unep.org; Healthy Child Healthy World, HealthyChild.org; Our Stolen Future, OurStolenFuture.org.

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