PLASTICWISE INDIGO

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Plastic can be recycled can't it? What's the problem?

Many plastic items are used only once before being discarded. About one-third of plastics in Australia are single use disposable items. Plastic items that are not appropriately disposed of can pollute our environment. As plastic production increases, plastic pollution is likely to grow. In Australia, plastic is the main source of litter in open spaces like beaches, highways and parks.

Plastic items that are not appropriately disposed of can pollute our environment. And as plastic production increases, plastic pollution is likely to grow. Globally, it is estimated that at least 8 million tonnes of plastic will enter the world's oceans each year — equivalent to dumping the contents of one garbage truck into the ocean every minute.

Recycling facilities are not equipped to sort plastic bags from other mixed recyclables. Plastic bags can get caught in mechanical sorting machinery and cause machines to break down.

What about all the resources used to make alternatives to plastic bags?

It generally takes more resources to produce a reusable bag than a disposable bag. But reusing a bag can improve its environmental performance. If reused enough times, a reusable bag eventually produces less greenhouse gas emissions, and consumes less energy, water, and raw materials per use than a single use bag.

Some bags have low impacts in one area but high impacts in another. For example, while paper bags may be preferable to lightweight and thick plastic bags from a litter perspective, producing them can consume a significant amount of resources, and emit more greenhouse gases. Reuse your bags as many times as possible to get the most environmental benefits.

Are coffee cups recyclable?

It is estimated that Australians use 1 billion disposable coffee cups each year. Coffee cups make up a significant proportion of Victoria's litter by volume. Most coffee cups are a mix of paper and plastic, and although all recycling services will accept the plastic lids, only a few currently recycle the cups. This is because the plastic lining is difficult to separate from the paper cup, and often creates quality issues, like discolouration, in recycled paper products.

I put my plastic straw or stirrer in the yellow bin, so what's wrong with that?

Small plastic items, like straws, are more likely to end up as litter. Their small size means that they can easily escape waste collection systems, and that they are difficult to recapture, once lost.

Because plastic straws are lightweight, they can easily make their way into waterways and oceans. Even when plastic straws are collected by the waste management system, it is rarely technically possible or economically viable to recycle them.

Plastic utensils are often used for convenience at takeaway food outlets. Because they cannot easily be sorted at recycling facilities, plastic utensils are usually disposed of to landfill. Switching to reusable utensils, wherever possible, can help avoid this outcome and reduce the environmental impact of producing these items.

ONLY 14% OF PLASTIC IS RECOVERED FOR RECYCLING.

8 MILLION TONNES OF PLASTIC ENTERS THE WORLD'S OCEANS EACH YEAR.

For more information
www.indigoshire.vic.gov.au 1300 365 003 info@indigoshire.vic.gov.au

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What's the problem with bottled water?

In 2014, 530 billion plastic bottles were produced globally. This number is expected to increase to nearly 650 billion by 2019. Although plastic drink containers, such as water and soft drink bottles, can easily be recycled through household recycling services or public recycling bins, they make up nearly a quarter of Victoria's litter when measured by volume. Furthermore, a huge amount of resources goes into making disposable water bottles that are only used once.

Can I still use balloons? What are the alternatives?

Balloons are not compliant with the Plasticwise Policy. All released balloons, including those labelled as biodegradable, return to the earth or ocean as litter.

Dolphins, whales, turtles, and many other marine species, as well as animals such as cows, dogs, sheep, tortoises, birds and other animals have all been hurt or killed by balloons. The animal is usually killed from the balloon blocking its digestive tract, leaving them unable to take in any more nutrients. It slowly starves to death. The animals can also become entangled in the balloon and its ribbon making the animal unable to move or eat. Try some of these alternatives instead: www.balloonsblow.org

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What are micro-plastics?

Micro-plastics are small plastic pieces less than 5 millimetres in diameter. Some micro-plastics are created when larger plastic litter breaks down in the environment. Others are deliberately manufactured, like microbeads (found in personal care and cleaning products) and nurdles (small plastic pellets used to manufacture plastic products). On average, Australia's oceans already contain 4000 microplastic pieces per square kilometre.

Some research suggests that many marine animals cannot distinguish between their usual food source and micro-plastics. Micro-plastics remain in animals' stomachs once ingested, reducing their capacity to consume food and potentially causing starvation. Micro-plastics can also spread contamination and pollutants in the environment.

What are microbeads?

Microbeads are small plastic particles that are found in some cosmetics, personal care and cleaning products, where they act as abrasives or exfoliants. Just one use of a face scrub that contains microbeads can release between 4594 and 94,500 microbeads to the environment. Microbeads are designed to be rinsed off and washed down the drain, but are not captured by most wastewater treatment systems. So, they often end up in lakes, rivers and oceans. Because they are so small and easily dispersed, it is nearly impossible to recover them from the environment.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are biodegradable products the answer?

It's a better option than single use plastic, but ensure people using the products know what bin to dispose them in, and those bins are made available. Biodegradable plastics can contaminate plastic waste collected for recycling. As they are not always easily identifiable or easy to separate out, biodegradable plastics can lower the quality of products made with recycled plastics. Biodegradable products should be collected for composting, or go in the red bin for landfill.

Biodegradation is a chemical process in which materials are metabolised to CO2, water, and biomass with the help of microorganisms. The process of biodegradation depends on the conditions (e.g. location, temperature, humidity, presence of microorganisms, etc.) of the specific environment (industrial composting plant, garden compost, soil, water, etc.) and on the material or application itself. Consequently, the process and its outcome can vary considerably.

What are bioplastics?

Bioplastics encompasses a whole family of materials which are biobased, biodegradable, or both.

Derived from renewable biomass sources, such as plant based starch, sugarcane or cellulose, Bioplastics are already used in packaging, agriculture, catering, consumer electronics and automotive industries, just to name a few.

While bioplastic can be recycled, no recycling facilities in Australia have the technology to do so. Unless the products make it to a composting facility, they are destined for landfill.

Are compostable products the answer?

If you choose compostable products, check that they are home-compostable, and ensure the products are actually collected in a separate bin for composting. If the compostable products end up in the red or yellow bin – there has been no benefit.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

BIODEGRADABLE

Made from natural material (such as corn-starch) which breaks down into organic material and water over time.

COMPOSTABLE

Products made from material assessed to be compostable in a commercial composting environment in accordance with Australian Standards.

Confusingly however, many products labelled as 'compostable', including bags, only decompose in commercial composters, and cannot be composted at home.

DEGRADABLE

A plastic bag that can be broken down by chemical or biological processes, e.g. sunlight. The plastic bag breaks up into smaller pieces, and never actually breaks down because these products are not made or organic material.

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ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF SHOPPING BAGS

Bag type	Materials consumption	Climate change	Energy consumption	Water use	Litter marine impacts
Lightweight plastic bag	•••	••	••	•	•••••
Thick plastic bag	••••	••	•••	•	•••••
Paper bag	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••	•
Green bag	•	•	•	•	••
Cotton bag	•	•	•	•••••	•

Source: Zero Waste South Australia & Hyder Consulting (2009)
Note: More dots indicates greater relative impact.

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