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How to Reduce Your Microplastic Exposure



Image credit: Kyle Smart

Tiny plastic particles, called microplastics, are everywhere including within our bodies.

They are almost impossible to avoid, given how ubiquitous they are. It's a difficult truth to swallow, but research shows that, every year, we consume and ingest between 39,000 and 52,000 microplastic particles with our food. We also absorb them through inhalation and skin contact.

Research is only now beginning to give us a clear idea of how it affects us. Studies so far suggest links to fertility issues, metabolic conditions, hormone health, inflammation, damaging tissues and causing changes to our microbiome.

Small changes though, can make a difference, and there have been several studies suggesting ways to help limit our microplastic exposure.

1. Drink tap water not bottled

Plastic particles can leach into the water because of the bottle being exposed to heat or sunlight, left sitting on a shelf for long periods, or simply being squeezed. It's then absorbed into the body of the person drinking it. "Generally, tap water is better," explains Dr Federica Amati, head nutritionist at Zoe.

So, use your reusable stainless-steel bottle for on-the-go hydration. If your budget allows, buy one with a filter which can screen out the main toxins. The best ones are reverse osmosis filters, which also remove microplastics and forever chemicals

2. Swap out plastic containers and utensils

Likewise, particles from plastic food container, such as Tupperware and plastic can leach into food, impacting metabolic health and damaging the mitochondria in human

colon cells, The black plastic trays that microwaveable dinners come in are among the worst offenders.

“They’re often made from recycled electrical equipment, which means they were treated with fire-retardant chemicals,” says Amati. “When we heat them, these compounds, along with microplastics, can end up in our food.”

If your containers, food packaging, cups, utensils, and chopping boards are plastic, try to switch to glass, stainless steel or ceramic wherever possible. And if you do still have plastic in your kitchen, try to avoid combining it with heat.

3. Rethink non-stick pans

Using a non-stick pan (such as Teflon), means exposing yourself to polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), which provides the coating. While PTFE doesn’t start life as a microplastic, using the pan with metal utensils, abrasive sponges and high temperatures can cause it to chip and flake away, often releasing microplastics into your food.

Swap non-stick products for stainless steel or ceramic options, which are non-toxic. Hand-washing, using medium heat and high smoke point oils is also recommended to preserve the lifespan of any non-stick coating

4. Wear natural fibres where possible

Check the label in your everyday garments, and you’ll likely find fabrics like polyester, nylon, spandex, acrylic or fleece—all of which either contain or are entirely plastic. Washing them releases microplastics into the water, which eventually ends up back in our food chain. Plus, they sit close to your skin and can be inhaled.

Natural fibres like cotton, linen, wool, silk, or hemp are better options. If you do still have synthetic fabrics in your wardrobe, consider washing them less often, and air-drying rather than tumble drying to reduce shedding.

5. Check your tea bags

“Tea bags often contain plastic, so when you submerge them in hot water, some of that will pass into your mug of tea,” says Amati. Look out for ingredients such as polypropylene, polyethene, and nylon on the box—all of which indicate plastic content.

The good news: there are plenty of alternatives made from cornstarch, wood pulp or organic cotton. “Alternatively, you can also use loose-leaf tea instead,” says Amati.

6. Consider your personal care products

Whether it’s your moisturizer or menstrual products, it’s worth scrutinising the ingredients in all of your personal care products. Try to use products that have the

least amount of plastic especially bisphenol A (BPA), a chemical used to make certain plastics.

In skincare, avoid plastic ingredients like polyethene (PE), polypropylene (PP), nylon, and acrylates.

For period care, consider tampons made from organic materials such as cotton and bamboo, as around 90% of period products contain plastic. Also consider occasionally swapping to a BPA-free menstrual cup or pads (as they're worn externally) instead of tampons to reduce exposure.

Also consider switching to bar soap, shampoo or conditioner bars, and opting for products sold in glass, metal, ceramic or paper packaging where possible.

7. Reduce your ultra-processed food intake

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) contain significantly more microplastics than whole foods because they encounter plastics during production and packaging.

"UPFs are produced by adding together an array of compounds and chemicals, all of which are produced and stored in contact with plastics; they are then reconstructed using multiple industrial techniques, including contact with plastic machinery, conveyor belts, and so on," says Amati. "And then, of course, they're packed into plastic packaging where they sit, slowly absorbing more microplastics and the chemicals that are used to give them properties like flexibility or malleability."

Since whole foods are more nutritious and involve far less packaging, they're a win-win all round.

8. Eat more fibre

Emerging science suggests that consuming fibre may help reduce our microplastic burden by binding to particles in the gut and promoting their excretion through the stool.

"Fibre helps keep us regular, so food (including that which contains microplastics) doesn't hang around in the gut longer than it needs to," says Dr. Amati. "Eating a fibre rich diet also strengthens the gut barrier by supporting microbiome health, which in turn helps prevent microplastics from travelling from the gut into the bloodstream."

9. Vacuum with a HEPA filter

When fibres break down and release microplastics, they often end up in household dust or in the air, where they can be inhaled. If your budget allows, swap your regular hoover for one with a HEPA filter. While most vacuums suck up dust only to blow the smallest particles back out, HEPA filters are far better at trapping most of these particles.