

Help End Plastic Pollution!

The theme of the 2018 Earth Day Network Campaign, as well as the theme for some NIH Earth Day events, is “End Plastic Pollution.” The threat of plastic pollution has become a global issue with many known and unknown consequences. Plastic pollution arises because plastic items do not biodegrade in our environment through natural means. The result is our plastic waste will far out-live us in the environment, such as plastic bottles that could last up to 450 years!¹ A further complication is that these materials break down into smaller pieces as they age in the environment. The small pieces, called microplastics, are often ingested by small animals, which can be harmful to the animal and introduce toxins into the food chain.² Many of the harmful effects of plastic pollution on the environment are still unknown, yet over 400 million tons of plastic are created each year.³ Below are some ways you can help prevent plastic from polluting the environment.

While at NIH:

- 1) **Minimize your single-use plastics!** Many plastic items are used for only a few minutes and then discarded into the trash, where they will persist for potentially hundreds of years. A few single-use plastics that are prevalent in the workplace are disposable coffee cups, water bottles, disposable utensils and drinking straws. To avoid these products, bring in a mug or bottle for your coffee or water and utensils that can be reused. Additionally, you can refrain from using plastic drinking straws or purchase environmentally-friendly reusable options, such as straws made from bamboo, metal or paper.
- 2) **Pack your lunch in reusable containers!** The use of plastic bags and takeout containers heavily contributes to plastic pollution. Consider reusable containers for your lunch, which can be washed and reused. Also, you can choose to dine-in or skip “eating out” to avoid takeout containers.
- 3) **Be sure to recycle whenever possible!** It is estimated that 91% of plastic is not recycled.³ Consult recycling bin signs for information about what can be recycled, or send any questions you have to your campus recycling contact ([see the November 2017 "Recycling" issue](#)). Make sure all recyclables are clean and empty before you place them in the recycling bin!

While at home:

- 1) **Minimize your single-use plastics!** As mentioned above, single-use plastics are a large contributor to plastic pollution. In fact, every day enough plastic straws are used to wrap around the circumference of the Earth two and a half times!² In the household, single-use plastics include the items mentioned above, but can also extend to grocery bags, product packaging, shipping materials and much more. One way to reduce plastic grocery bag use is to bring your own reusable bags!
- 2) **Avoid microbeads!** Beauty products commonly use plastic microbeads as exfoliating agents in face washes, body washes, etc. These microbeads are carried into water streams where they are consumed by fish and other animals, sometimes with fatal consequences.

- 3) **Cook more!** You can cook at home more frequently to avoid using takeout containers.
- 4) **Buy in bulk!** Items like single-serving yogurt cups and individually-wrapped toilet paper use more plastic than is necessary for packaging purposes. Consider buying items in bulk, when possible, to avoid such packaging.
- 5) **Be sure to recycle whenever possible!** As mentioned above, recycling is important! We acknowledge that cutting out all plastic is nearly impossible. Therefore, when you do need to use plastic, make sure you dispose of it properly! Please consult the guidelines for recycling in your residential area using [this directory](#).
- 6) **Participate in a Beach/River Cleanup!** If you are feeling motivated, consider volunteering to clean up a location that is already affected by plastic pollution. Many waterways already show evidence of pollution from this growing problem. You can help by collecting this waste and disposing of it properly. Local wildlife will greatly appreciate your hard work!