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Is plastic affecting our health?

We're all aware of the growing threat of plastic pollution and its negative impact on the environment, but what about the effects on our health? We explore what the facts tell us so far, and share a few tips on making simple plastic swaps that can benefit your wallet and the planet.

It seems that every day another news story breaks about the destructive effect plastic is having on our planet, as it takes thousands of years to decompose. Between [4.8 and 12.7 million tonnes](#) of the stuff enters the ocean each year, with devastating effects on wildlife.

But it's not just plastic bags and bottles that are the problem; both our marine and [land ecosystems](#) are contaminated with 'microplastics'. Microplastics are formed when plastic components break down into smaller and smaller pieces over time, measuring from one nanometre up to five millimetres.

A recent [study](#) in Singapore found that microplastics from local beaches harboured harmful bacteria. Don't panic, this doesn't mean you can't drink your tap water. But it is a wake-up call for what has the potential to affect us in years to come.

Is plastic bad for your health?

Dr Philipp Schwabl, a gastroenterologist at the Medical University of Vienna, recently conducted a [study](#) that found microplastics in human faeces.

"Based on current knowledge it is most likely that the vast amount of ingested microplastics are transported through our gastrointestinal tract and finally are excreted again," Schwabl explains.

"However, while inside our body, these particles are in close contact with digestive fluids and with the intestinal wall," he cautions. "It is also possible that very small microplastic particles get absorbed into the tissue, where they may cause inflammatory reactions – like a wooden splinter underneath the skin."

So far, this is scientific speculation. It needs to be clarified whether these particles can reach a concentration that would trigger an immune reaction.

Schwabl does make one thing clear though: "While there is some data from animal studies showing that microplastics may have a potential to harm, we need further studies to elucidate the impact of microplastics on human health."

So the health implications for animals are as yet undetermined, and for humans even more so. However, while there may be no immediate threat, consuming minuscule plastic particles is not something to be complacent about.

Luckily one thing we do know is that using plastic bottles and containers [does not cause cancer](#), despite what a [common myth](#) may have you believe. Cancer Research UK states: "In the UK there is very strict regulation about plastics and other materials that are used for food or drink. These limits are well below the level which could cause harm in humans."

What can we do about it?

Thankfully, the plastic problem is becoming an internationally recognised issue. Last year, the European Parliament approved a [ban on single-use plastics](#), and there are a few simple swaps you can make at home to help out.

"Everyday items such as plastic cutlery, straws and crockery are of course convenient, but they come at a huge cost to the environment," says Brianne West, founder of zero-waste beauty brand [Ethique](#).

You can reduce your use of these kinds of single-use plastics through a bit of advance planning. Pack your own cutlery, invest in a reusable coffee cup and think about whether you really need to accept a straw.

Plastic bags are used for an average of [12 minutes](#) – always keep a tote bag in your car or bag, and try keeping your growing pile of 'bags for life' somewhere you will remember them.

Shop at your local grocers if you can, which can often work out cheaper for you, and avoid unnecessary plastic bag use in your fruit and veg shop.

When it comes to toiletries, a plastic-free routine goes a long way.

"Many people believe their containers are all getting upcycled into something new, but the truth is that just 9% of plastic is recycled globally," reveals West.

"The water content of many beauty products can be removed to create solid beauty products, which can be packaged in compostable sleeves and completely remove the need for plastic packaging," she adds.

Try opting for soap bars instead of shower gel, as well as solid shampoo and conditioner bars. And even checking if your cotton pads and wet wipes are degradable will reduce landfill waste.

[Reusable menstrual products](#) are also a great way to cut the cost of your monthly period.

While making your own cleaning supplies will not only save on single-use plastic, it could also be [better for your health](#). Cut up old tee shirts and tea towels to have as reusable cleaning rags.

"If everyone made these simple changes, it would cut down on unnecessary waste and reduce the already extortionate amount of plastic which ends up in our oceans. It is shocking to think that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish!" West exclaims.

Every little helps

Realistically, no one can be expected to get rid of plastic products overnight. Some swaps are much easier to make than others, and it can be daunting if you're on a budget.

Don't let the initial cost put you off completely. A plastic-free shampoo bar will last for longer than an average bottle of shampoo and purchasing a reusable item will save you more in the long run.

A manageable way to sustain your plastic-free swapping is to try to make just one swap per month. Every little helps.

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