

Chances Are, You Enjoy Eating Plastic

Without even knowing it, you have been eating the weight of a credit card in plastic every week. You may be wondering, "How is this possible?" Well, the answer lies all around you. The device you are reading this story off of is made up of some plastic. So is the water you may be drinking, and more obviously, the plastic items and containers you use in your everyday life. It is no secret that plastic has become a normal part of our everyday life. We depend so much on plastic that most of us think very little about what it's made of and where it will end up once we are done using it.

Think back to the last time you ordered take out or had something delivered. The straws, cups, and utensils that came in the plastic bag are most likely constructed from plastics---styrofoam being one of the worse types. Now, what did you do when you finished your drink or no longer needed the utensils? Did you throw it away or recycle it? If you recycled it, did you rinse off the food residue? If you recycled it, does your trash company recycle the type of plastic you used? There are many questions you must think of every time you use plastic that could impact how that same plastic can find its way from the trash back to you.

With over 300 tons of plastic products produced on average each year, the plastic industry is a global market in high demand. The chemistry of plastic is composed of thousands of atoms bonded together that make the natural breakdown of plastic a long and hindersome process. With this much plastic produced each year, it can take hundreds to thousands of years for it all to degrade, even then, there may still be plastics left over.

Due to this, plastic waste finds itself trapped in the many streams, rivers, and oceans across the world. Try to imagine a map of Texas. Think about the twenty-nine million people who live in Texas. Now imagine Texas doubled in size, or is about 1.6 million square kilometers, and you have now imagined the immense size of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch located in the Pacific Ocean, floating somewhere between California and Hawaii. If you're wondering how this affects you millions of miles away, my question for you is whether or not you enjoy seafood and if you have to drink water, which, if I had to take a wild guess, every single person needs water.

In about 26-94% of all fish, microplastics can be found, based on a variety of studies conducted over the years. On average, 12,000 to 24,000 tons of plastic are eaten by fish each year; this estimate could also be much lower than the actual amount. When you grab sushi, you are eating plastic just about every meal or every other meal. Each time you drink from tap or bottled water, you are consuming plastic; more plastic is consumed if you continue to reuse a plastic bottle. If you like drinking beer or are using salt regularly to season your food, microplastics can be found in both.

Let's say you don't like eating seafood. You already ingest microplastics when you drink water, but let's say you like eating beef, pork, or some other meat source. The parts of the fish that are not used normally for human consumption can be turned into other products, or byproducts, like fish oil, medicines, vitamins, and animal feed. Fish meal, or ground up fish, can be fed to animals like chickens and cows. Other recycled foods that are turned into animal feed may also contain trace amounts of microplastics. It is important as consumers to look into not only where our food is coming from, but what our food ate itself.

Now, this information is probably beginning to alarm you, if it hasn't already. If you can see how plastic pollution is a problem, you can now see how plastic pollution contributes much more to the climate crisis than you think. In order to make plastic, greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, are released into Earth's atmosphere. As plastic degrades during waste management or when it is left to pollute streams, rivers, and oceans, the plastic continues to release these harmful greenhouse gases.

Carbon dioxide exists in millions of tons in the oceans and atmosphere. When this gas, along with other greenhouse gases, are allowed to remain and continue to increase, other issues arise. Ice caps melt. Sea levels rise. Weather patterns and ocean currents change. Violent storms and natural disasters occur. The oceans acidify, or in other words, experience a drop in oxygen levels and pH levels. Animals and fish become poisoned and die. Coral reefs across the world are bleached, erode, and die; these are just a few of the terrible consequences on top of plastic consumption caused by the production of said plastic.

So, what can you do about all this?

If you enjoy reading or doing research, educate yourself further on plastic pollution, the climate crisis, and other climate issues. I have listed a few books and websites I've read to bring you all of this information.

1. Robert Henson's "The Thinking Person's Guide to Climate Change"
2. Jeff Newman's "THIS IS HOW THE WORLD ENDS"
3. News sources such as The New York Times, PBS, and The Guardian
4. Yale Climate Connection

If you live in The United States or a country with representatives, reach out to your representatives to help create bills and pass laws that limit the legal amount of plastic in human and animal foods, greenhouse gas emissions, and support government programs and initiatives that fight climate change.

Support organizations, companies, and invest in reusable energy and materials. Limiting your own plastic waste can go a long way. Buy products that are built from recycled materials.

If you can recycle, make sure to do it right. Read the recycle information label to know the type of plastic the item is made of and the directions it lists on how to properly recycle it. Request information from your trash company on what plastics they can actually recycle. Make sure you rinse off any residue on the containers. Just know that if you recycle something your trash company cannot take or forget to rinse off residue, all the recycles that came into contact with it are no longer able to be recycled.

Together, we can create a better tomorrow.

A tomorrow full of life.

A tomorrow built on health, not wealth.

A tomorrow that gives Mother Nature the respect she deserves.