

SimpleSteps

FOR BETTER HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE LIVING

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Ask Us

One thing that is puzzling me these days are the plastics that are used so ubiquitously as packaging, the kind you find wrapped around paper goods, breads, etc. They don't seem to be recyclable, and I wonder why they can't be, like the plastics used in shopping bags.

Asked on Wednesday, 7 October 2009 by **Phil G.**

Paul McRandle responds:

In the last few years things have started to change: Bread bags, for example, are now accepted for recycling at locations that accept plastic grocery bags. But when it comes to why product packaging isn't made of recyclable materials, there are several possible answers, according to Keith Christman, senior director of packaging at the American Chemistry Council. In some cases, the plastic is recyclable but local programs don't have facilities to handle them. For instance, while many cities in California accept plastic yogurt containers for recycling (and [Whole Foods Market](#) is taking them in other regions), most locations do not. In cases such as food wraps and frozen food or salad bags, plastic that might otherwise be recyclable is too contaminated with food. "Washing bags and wraps is very resource- and water-intensive," says Christman. Finally, some packaging is composed of multiple layers that cannot be recycled but help preserve food from spoilage and so prevent waste.

If you don't mind going to the trouble of taking bags and wraps to a drop-off center, however, there is a large variety you can recycle. Besides Whole Foods, stores such as Wal-Mart and Barnes & Noble have collection boxes for bags; see [earth911.org](#) for sites near you.

These plastic bag types can be recycled:

- all clean, dry bags labeled #2 or #4
- bread bags
- case wrap (e.g., snacks, water bottles)
- cereal box liners
- diaper wrap (packaging)
- dry cleaning bags
- electronic wrap
- furniture wrap
- grocery bags
- newspaper bags
- plastic retail bags (cut off hard plastic and string handles)
- plastic shipping envelopes (remove labels)
- produce bags
- toilet paper, napkin, and paper towel wraps
- Tyvek (without glue, labels, or other materials)
- food storage bags (cut off hard components)

Whatever the plastic you're trying to recycle, the key lies in learning the recycling codes and checking with your sanitation department about which plastic types it collects. Here is a rundown:

#1 PET (or PETE)—widely recycled; used for beverage containers

#2 HDPE—widely recycled; used for milk containers and grocery bags

#3 VINYL or PVC—cannot be recycled

#4 LDPE—recyclable at drop-off centers; used for plastic film and produce bags

#5 PP—recyclable in some areas; used for yogurt containers

#6 PS—rarely recyclable; used for coffee cups, serving plates and dishes

#7 Miscellaneous: PLA and PC—compostable PLA can be sent to a municipal composting facility, but PC (polycarbonate) is neither compostable nor recyclable

[This or That: Two-Liter Plastic Bottles vs. Aluminum Cans](#)

[Minute, Morning, Month: Keep fish safe to Eat. BYOB shopping bag.](#)

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Chemical Index

Arsenic

Asbestos

Atrazine



Fact: In a year, the average American consumes close to her entire body weight in high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and refined sugar.

Tip: Steer clear of HFCS and refined sugar by avoiding highly processed foods.

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