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August 16, 2023

Plastic has infiltrated almost every corner of the Earth, as researchers have found plastics in as far flung places as the Arctic snow to remote deserts. Microplastics, a type of plastic smaller than 5 mm, are particularly pervasive and insidious. They form through the breakdown of plastic into tiny particles that end up in the ocean, air, and soil.

Researchers have found microplastics damage human cells, decrease reproductive health, and disrupt the endocrine system. Microplastics also act as a vessel for harmful substances to enter the body as they can absorb chemicals linked to cancers and weakened immune systems.

The ubiquity of microplastic contamination allows them to easily enter the human body. Microplastics are in the air we breathe, meaning every time you take a breath, you're breathing in plastic and additives. We aren't even safe from the clothes we wear. Research has confirmed micro- and nanoplastics can be absorbed into the human body through the skin barrier, with 60% of all materials made into clothing being plastic. As a result, our daily interactions with synthetic fabrics unknowingly contribute to the increasing presence of plastic particles within our own bodies.

Microplastics are also in our food. Industrial discharge of poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) into waters contaminates the sludge used to fertilize crops. Microplastics also enter your body through the plastic packaging found on almost everything in the grocery store.

Almost everything you eat or drink will contain microplastics, but some foods are more contaminated than others. Here's a list of the foods with high microplastic contamination:

### **Fish and Shellfish**

There are 24 trillion pieces of microplastics in the ocean, so it's unsurprising that sea animals often ingest plastic. When eating an oceanic creature, you're also eating all the plastics it has consumed. Researchers estimate an average person consumes about 53,864 particles of microplastics annually from seafood, an equivalent to 17 credit cards. So the next time you're at a seafood restaurant, it might be safer to have the salad and skip the microplastics.

### **Tea**

Tea bags are typically made of plastic, so when they're placed in hot water, plastics melt into the drink. According to one study, tea bags at brewing temperature release about 11.6 billion microplastic and 3.1 billion nanoplastic particles into the water. To avoid putting millions of pieces of plastic into your body, buy loose-leaf tea and use a strainer instead of a single-use teabag.

### **Fruits and vegetables**

Although you're supposed to eat four to five servings of them per day, fruits and vegetables are not safe from the grip of microplastics. Fruits and vegetables absorb microplastics through their root system and they enter seeds, leaves, and fruit depending on the microplastic's size. Apples and carrots are the most contaminated fruit and vegetable, respectively, with over 100,000 microplastics per gram.

### **Beer**

Beer is made from water and crops such as wheat, which both contain microplastics due to plastic pollution. There are about 28 microplastic particles per liter of beer which outpaces other drinks such as soda, iced tea, and energy drinks.

### **Salt**

When you're seasoning your food, you might be shaking on hundreds of microplastics. One study found that of 39 brands of salt, only three did not contain microplastics. Researchers estimated an average adult consumes around 2,000 microplastic particles a year from salt.

## **What can you do?**

Plastic has infiltrated every part of our lives, leading to harmful health and environmental impacts. However, there are steps you can take so your next meal contains fewer microplastics:

Sign the global plastics treaty petition to advocate for global requirements to reduce plastic production and pollution.

Educate yourself on plastics using EARTHDAY.ORG's Plastics Health Research Module and share your findings with friends on social media.

With help from everyone to reduce plastic, we can make a difference in the battle between Planet vs. Plastics. For more information on EARTHDAY.ORG's effort to achieve a 60%

reduction in plastics by 2040, please visit the [Earth Day 2024](#) page.

Tags:

plastic pollution



Grace Higgins

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