

F a c t s

Common Questions About Plastic Containers

Plastic is everywhere – water bottles, plastic wrap, food containers and other everyday items. It can be confusing to know what plastics are safe to store food in, what can be heated and what should be avoided. What are the safety risks when it comes to food and plastics?

What is Bisphenol A (BPA)?

BPA is an industrial chemical used to make hard, clear plastics (also known as polycarbonate). BPA can be found in reusable hard water bottles, baby bottles and children's sippy cups. It is also used in the lining found on the inside of metal cans such as canned foods.

Why should I be concerned about BPA?

- Scientists believe BPA in the body can affect the actions of some hormones and may lead to cancer or fertility problems.
- BPA may damage the environment.
- For most people, BPA does not pose a health risk because our exposure to the chemical is very low. The general population can still use plastic water bottles, canned foods and drinks and plastic storage containers.
- The biggest concern with exposure to BPA is for infants less than 18 months old. This is because when baby bottles are heated, BPA can transfer into the hot liquid. Also, some cans of infant formula are lined with BPA. Because of these types of exposure, it is possible that infants get exposed to an amount of BPA that is closer to the level where health risks could occur.

How do I know if something has BPA in it?

Look at the bottom of your plastic container. If it has a number 7 recycling code (see the triangle symbol on the bottom) then it may contain BPA. You may also see the number 7 with the letters "PC" beside it. This means the plastic will contain BPA.

If there is no number on the plastic container you cannot tell if it contains BPA. The safer plastic containers to choose are those labeled with the numbers 2, 4 and 5.

Health & Environment Facts

Can I reuse my plastic food containers? Can I store leftovers in them?

- Food containers, such as those for yogurt or margarine are designed to be “single use”. They should only be used for their intended purpose and then recycled.
- They are not good for storing leftovers because they are not strong enough for freezing, thawing and frequent cleanings. If you do reuse them, make sure to allow your leftovers to cool completely before storing.
- Do not use containers that are damaged, stained or have unpleasant smells. A better choice is to use glass or ceramic containers to store foods.

Can plastic water bottles be reused?

Plastic water bottles are supposed to be used only once and then recycled. If you reuse a water bottle be sure to wash it with soap and water and thoroughly dry after each use. Water bottles that are not cleaned properly can contain harmful germs on the mouth of the bottle and in any grooves in the plastic.

Can I use plastic wrap in the microwave?

- The health concern associated with plastic wrap is that the food may absorb some of the plasticizer (which is the chemical that makes the wrap flexible). This is mostly a concern when the wrap is heated to a high temperature or when used with fatty or oily foods.
- If you’re going to use plastic wrap make sure it is labelled “microwave safe”.
- Avoid heating food or drinks in plastic containers, including baby bottles when using the microwave or oven. Instead, transfer the food to a glass or porcelain container or replace the plastic lid with a plate (in the microwave) or foil (in the oven).

Source: EatRight Ontario, Ministry of Health Promotion