

What Types of Plastic Exist?



What Do the Recycling Symbols Mean?

Number 1 Plastics

PET or PETE (polyethylene terephthalate)

Found in: Soft drink, water and beer bottles; mouthwash bottles; peanut butter containers; salad dressing and vegetable oil containers; food trays for use in ovens.

Recycling: Picked up through most curbside recycling programs.

Recycled into: Polar fleece, fiber, tote bags, furniture, carpet, paneling, straps, (occasionally) new containers

PET plastic is the most common for single-use bottled beverages, because it is inexpensive, lightweight and easy to recycle. It poses low risk of leaching breakdown products. Recycling rates remain relatively low (around 20%), though the material is in high demand by remanufacturers.

Number 2 Plastics

HDPE (high density polyethylene)

Found in: Milk jugs, juice bottles; bleach, detergent and household cleaner bottles; shampoo bottles; some trash and shopping bags; motor oil bottles; butter and yogurt tubs; cereal box liners

Recycling: Picked up through most curbside recycling programs, although some allow only those containers with necks.

Recycled into: Laundry detergent bottles, oil bottles, pens, recycling containers, floor tile, drainage pipe, lumber, benches, doghouses, picnic tables, fencing

HDPE is a versatile plastic with many uses, especially for packaging. It carries low risk of leaching and is readily recyclable into many goods.

Number 3 Plastics

V (Vinyl) or PVC

Found in: Window cleaner and detergent bottles, shampoo bottles, cooking oil bottles, clear food packaging, wire jacketing, medical equipment, siding, windows, piping

Recycling: Rarely recycled; accepted by some plastic lumber makers.

Recycled into: Decks, paneling, mudflaps, roadway gutters, flooring, cables, speed bumps, mats

PVC is tough and weathers well, so it is commonly used for piping, siding and similar applications. PVC contains chlorine, so its manufacture can release highly dangerous dioxins. If you must cook with PVC, don't let the plastic touch food. Also never burn PVC, because it releases toxins.

Number 4 Plastics

LDPE (low density polyethylene)

Found in: Squeezable bottles; bread, frozen food, dry cleaning and shopping bags; tote bags; clothing; furniture; carpet

Recycling: LDPE is not often recycled through curbside programs, but some communities will accept it. Plastic shopping bags can be returned to many stores for recycling.

Recycled into: Trash can liners and cans, compost bins, shipping envelopes, paneling, lumber, landscaping ties, floor tile

LDPE is a flexible plastic with many applications. Historically it has not been accepted through most American curbside recycling programs, but more and more communities are starting to accept it.

Number 5 Plastics

PP (polypropylene)

Found in: Some yogurt containers, syrup bottles, ketchup bottles, caps, straws, medicine bottles

Recycling: Number 5 plastics can be recycled through some curbside programs.

Recycled into: Signal lights, battery cables, brooms, brushes, auto battery cases, ice scrapers, landscape borders, bicycle racks, rakes, bins, pallets, trays

Polypropylene has a high melting point, and so is often chosen for containers that must accept hot liquid. It is gradually becoming more accepted by recyclers.

Number 6 Plastics (BAD!! BAD!! BAD!!)

PS (polystyrene)

Found in: Disposable plates and cups, meat trays, egg cartons, carry-out containers, aspirin bottles, compact disc cases

Recycling: Number 6 plastics can be recycled through some curbside programs.

Recycled into: Insulation, light switch plates, egg cartons, vents, rulers, foam packing, carry-out containers

Polystyrene can be made into rigid or foam products -- in the latter case it is popularly known as the trademark Styrofoam. **Evidence suggests polystyrene can leach potential toxins into foods.** The material was long on environmentalists' hit lists for dispersing widely across the landscape, and for being notoriously difficult to recycle. Most places still don't accept it, though it is gradually gaining traction.

Number 7 Plastics (POTENTIALLY BAD!! POTENTIALLY BAD!!)

Miscellaneous

Found in: Three- and five-gallon water bottles, 'bullet-proof' materials, sunglasses, DVDs, iPod and computer cases, signs and displays, certain food containers, nylon

Recycling: Number 7 plastics have traditionally not been recycled, though some curbside programs now take them.

Recycled into: Plastic lumber, custom-made products

A wide variety of plastic resins that don't fit into the previous categories are lumped into number 7. A few are even made from plants (polyactide) and are compostable. **Polycarbonate is number 7, and is the hard plastic that has parents worried these days, after studies have shown it can leach potential hormone disruptors.**