

Plastic Take-out Containers—Myths vs. Facts

The Myth	The Facts
<i>All plastic takeout containers are designed for one-time use and disposal.</i>	Polypropylene containers are dishwasher-safe, and can be reused by the consumer for as long as 6 months or more in some cases.
<i>It is unsafe to microwave plastic containers.</i>	This myth comes from the circulation of an email hoax over the past few years. Medical research has indicated that plastic containers marked "microwave-safe" pose no threat. Polypropylene containers are microwave safe and can be reused to reheat food again and again. For more information, review the EPA, Mayo Clinic, and American Cancer Society websites.
<i>Plastic containers produce off-odors and off-flavors when exposed to heat.</i>	This is true for some plastics that are not heat-tolerant, such as PET, PVC, and Polystyrene. Polypropylene containers are stable under heat lamps, in warming units, and in the microwave up to 230°F.
<i>Plastic containers are being banned for use and disposal in some communities.</i>	The bans are primarily targeted at only one-time use disposable plastic containers.
<i>Biodegradable plastics will decompose.</i>	Most waste, including biodegradable plastics, is collected by waste management companies and land filled. A land filled biodegradable plastic container will not decompose due to the lack of moisture, air, sunlight. Biodegradable plastics require treatment at a composting center to decompose over time.
<i>Plastics consume valuable energy resources.</i>	As with all manufactured products, energy is required to convert raw materials into a finished consumer product. However, at the end of its natural life, plastic products can be incinerated to recapture and utilize the energy they contain. Plastic products have the highest energy value for modern waste-to-energy incineration. For example, the energy content of a pound of polyethylene is 19,900 Btu. The energy content of a pound of Wyoming coal is 9,600 Btu.
<i>Recycling is the preferred strategy for cleaning up the environment.</i>	Recycling is only one of several strategies, and not the preferred strategy. #1 is reduction of waste, with #2 being reusing. Recycling is #3, primarily because it requires additional resources such as energy to collect, transport, sort, clean, and reprocess materials.
<i>Plastics that go into curbside recycling will get recycled into the same products.</i>	Some recycled plastics can be reused at 100% to make some products. Others require a blend of recycled plastics and virgin plastics to meet consumer requirements for quality, safety, and performance. Examples of new products are plastic fencing, decking, playground equipment, park benches, agricultural products, etc.
<i>Plastic packaging is not the best option.</i>	There is more than one factor in considering the net impact of a product on the environment or its benefit to mankind. Not always a simple answer. Is it a durable product or a disposable product? Does it protect food better than other alternatives? Is it more convenient? Is it safer? Does it create jobs? How much energy is consumed in creating, transporting, storing, and disposing/recycling? Could it be used as an energy source at the end of its life? Did it save other natural resources (i.e. trees)? For example, consider transporting food products in different containers made from plastic, glass, or steel. Transporting a truckload of food products or beverages in plastic containers, requires less fuel. Based on the increased weight of other containers, steel containers would require 9% more fuel and glass would require 37% more fuel.
<i>Plastics are a big waste problem.</i>	Paper and paperboard account for 34.2% of our landfills ; Plastic 11.8%.(EPA, 2005)
<i>Plastic isn't recycled.</i>	Plastic can be recycled, and more will be in the future, as consumer's demand products made with recycled plastics. One example is plastic lumber made from recycled plastics—an excellent alternative to wood lumber; no rotting, no painting, no mold, no termites. Reduces the depletion of our forests, an important task in protection of the ozone.
<i>Recycling is preferred by consumers.</i>	Recycling is not embraced by everyone. Focus groups have identified that consumers would prefer packaging that is reusable instead of recyclable. Reusable containers are preferred over biodegradable, as well.
<i>Consumers prefer a home-cooked meal</i>	This may be true, however trends in the last 20 years and the rise in disposable incomes have led consumers to purchase the home cooked meal in convenient takeout containers from the supermarket deli or the takeout window at their favorite dining establishment.