

Plastics by the numbers

Plastic pervades our lives, and we use tons of it every year to store and stow our foods, drinks, personal care products, and medicines. There are at least 7 types of plastic you may use on a regular basis, some sturdier than others, some safer for your health or for the environment, and some you'd be better off avoiding all together.

To know which is which, you need to know the plastic recycling codes. Usually stamped on the bottom of a container, this code will clue you in to its risks and its recycling potential. So, when choosing a take-out container, water jug, or baby bottle, flip it, and check it - and, after using it, chuck it in the right place so it gets properly recycled.

Here's a run-down of all the codes, the plastics used for them, where you'll find these plastics, whether they're safe, and whether they're easy to recycle.

#	Name	Where you'll find it	Is it safe?	Is it easy to recycle?
1	Polyethylene terephthalate (PET or PETE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-use pop or water bottles • Liquid cough medicine bottles 	Yes. But due to potential for bacteria buildup, do not use more than once for holding beverages.	Yes.
2	High density polyethylene (HDPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detergent and shampoo bottles • Translucent milk jugs 	Yes. No known risk of chemical leaking into product.	Yes.
3	Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meat wrappers • Cooking oil bottles • Some water bottles 	Questionable. PVC contains phthalates, which are suspected carcinogens and hormone disrupters.	Yes, but make sure to sort #3 plastic bottles separately from #1 plastic. Mixing of these two types can greatly disrupt the recycling process.
4	Low-density polyethylene (LDPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grocery bags • Sandwich bags • Cling wrap • Toilet paper, paper towel wrappers 	Yes. This is the material used to make opaque reusable baby bottles.	Yes, but not all municipal recycling programs accept #4 plastic.
5	Polypropylene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yogurt cups • Disposable diapers 	Yes. No known risks associated with #5 plastic.	Yes, but not all municipal recycling programs accept #5 plastic.
6	Polystyrene (PS, Styrofoam)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disposable coffee cups • Disposable cutlery • Take-out containers 	Questionable. Both the clear form and the more common Styrofoam contain styrene, a suspected carcinogen and hormone disrupter, which can leach into food.	No. Many municipal recycling programs do not accept #6 containers. But some do, so check your local recycling program.
7	Polycarbonate (PC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baby bottles • Reusable water bottles • Water cooler bottles • Food storage • Medicine bottles 	Questionable. PC contains bisphenol-A (BPA), a suspected carcinogen and hormone disrupter. Avoid heating this kind of plastic.	No. Many municipal recycling programs do not accept #7 containers. But some do, so check your local recycling program.

Another option is polylactide plastics (PLA). Food and beverage containers made from PLA contain converted starches from foods like corn, sugar cane, and potatoes. PLA plastics can't be recycled in the conventional way, but if you place an item in your compost heap, it will decompose in roughly 2 weeks. In comparison, most plastics take 100 years to biodegrade! And while these plastics are free from the questionable chemicals of #3, #6, and #7 plastics, it's too soon to tell if PLA is the perfect plastic.