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WHY CAN'T YOU RECYCLE DISPOSABLE COFFEE CUPS?

by Clara Christopher February 15, 2018

We've been confused about disposable coffee cups for a long time. Many of us think 'paper cups are made of paper, paper is recyclable, and therefore I can recycle paper cups.' But, this is rarely the case: almost all paper cups have a plastic lining that renders them virtually unrecyclable. The lining found on the inside of paper cups is made of polyethylene, and it's used to waterproof the cup, while protecting its integrity at hot and cold temperatures.



SO, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH THESE CUPS?

Disposable coffee cups with polyethylene lining are bad for the environment. In addition to polluting the land and water, they require a massive amount of resources and energy to manufacture. Once they're used, they're rarely properly recycled, and the plastic lining takes years to degrade. Small plastic particles make their way into animals' diets, accumulating in their systems, and eventually landing on our plates, through the food chain.

WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR PEOPLE TO STOP USING DISPOSABLE CUPS?

These days, disposable cups are too convenient compared to other options. Remembering to carry your portable coffee mug everywhere can be hard, and sometimes you just want to enjoy a specialty coffee with a friend in a public space. Unfortunately, though, this kind of activity can evolve into a wasteful habit.

The other factor at play is personal branding: these days especially, people strongly identify with their coffee brands because they feel that it shows off their status and refined taste.



WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO RECYCLE THESE CUPS?

After the cups are used, coffee residue sticks to the inside of the cup, contaminating it. When contaminated cups show up in a recycling load, it's commonly the case that the whole bin needs to be emptied into a landfill, as the unit is then considered unrecyclable.

But the main concern is that it's very difficult to recycle polyethylene lined cups. The plastic is tightly bonded to the paper, and these cups all have very stringent recycling requirements. Even though some can technically be recycled, there are very few facilities that provide the right services.

Now, there are other kinds of paper cups out there that are either biodegradable or wax-coated. But, recycling facilities have a lot of trouble distinguishing between the recyclable kind and the non-recyclable kind, as labelling isn't made clear on the cups.

WHY DO THESE CUPS HAVE UNRECYCLABLE PLASTIC LINING WHEREAS MILK CARTONS DON'T?

Disposable coffee cups used to be made with the same wax lining as milk cartons. But, once polyethylene linings were created for coffee cups, the wax linings were phased out. The plastic lining bonds more tightly to the inside of the cup, making them better for holding hot liquids. Unfortunately, the tight plastic bonding is what makes these cups harder to recycle.

The problem now is that polyethylene-lined cups are creating serious waste, and most manufacturers haven't transitioned to a new kind of cup lining.

SO, WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

There are a handful of ways you can take matters into your own hands. If you have some time, stay in and drink out of the cafe's ceramic cup. Alternatively, bring your own reusable cup. Some places even provide discounts on beverages, if you bring your own.



REUSABLE REVOLUTION

If you're on your way to work, consider drinking the office's coffee. If you're a connoisseur and that coffee isn't up to your standards, see if you're allowed to bring your own machine and beans to the office.

If all else fails, and you do end up using a disposable coffee cup, your best option is to throw the cup in the trash. If you use a lid and a sleeve, then make sure to recycle these items. Make sure to check the lid to verify which recycling bin it belongs in.