



Plastic Education — Better decisions for a better life

The Problem with Disposable Cups

WHAT ARE DISPOSABLE CUPS AND WHY ARE THEY SUCH A BIG PROBLEM?

Our love for coffee and other takeaway foods supports an enormous consumption of disposable cups around the world (billions every year).

It's a growing environmental problem that deserves attention.

If you're not 100% clear on why disposable cups are such a big problem, this post will help you understand what the issue is and why it's important to understand it.

Why are disposable cups a problem?

We are producing and throwing away billions of disposable cups per year. Yes, billions.

It is estimated that in the US alone, we use over **50 billion** coffee cups each year.

Both the production and disposal of cups have their negative impacts on our environment, contributing to global warming, pollution, and much more.

Production of Single Use Cups

The production of disposable cups relies heavily on natural resources.

Over **20 million** trees are cut down each year to produce single use paper cups.

The production of cups also requires quite a bit of energy input. Turning trees into paper and paper into usable cups requires a considerable amount of energy input – the source of which is almost exclusively fossil fuels.

It's estimated that the production of every 4 paper cups results in one pound of **CO2 emissions**.

Unlike paper cups, plastic and styrofoam cups do not require the input of wood. However, both derivatives of oil, another finite resource with its own environmental impact.

There are a variety of issues contributing to the environmental impact of producing cups, but the biggest concerns are:

Natural Resource Use – Inputs for disposable cup production draw on finite natural resources.

Emissions – The energy used to produce the billions of cups per year results in greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming.

Disposal of Single Use Cups

Yes, it's true – most single use cups can and should be recycled.

Less than 1% of the cups we produce are recycled.

Paper cups are difficult to recycle because the majority of them have a thin plastic lining to keep liquids from saturating the paper part of the cup. This plastic lining is difficult to separate and most recycling facilities are not equipped to do this type of recycling.

Plastic cups can be recycled, but it depends on the type of plastic used. It is not safe to assume that all disposable cups can be easily recycled.

Styrofoam cups can be recycled by some facilities but only a tiny fraction are reclaimed. Most go to the landfill or incinerator. When in the natural environment, styrofoam will break down into smaller and smaller pieces but will persist in natural environments for over 500 years.

The result of our inability to recycle is a staggering amount of refuse.

Use of Disposable Cups

The biggest issue with the use of disposable cups is that they are made to last for only one use.

A lot of energy goes into creating them and disposing of them just for one coffee or soda that lasts less than an hour.

There are also rising concerns about the health implications of using disposable cups, especially for hot liquids. Plastics and other ingredients used in cups may be ingested along with your drink.

Why are disposable cups a problem: Quick Summary

Production – The production of single use cups is resource intensive and has various peripheral environmental impacts.

Disposal – Less than 1% of the cups produced are recovered and recycled. The rest are sent to landfills, incinerated, or pollute the natural environment.

Use – The use of some types of disposable cups may have a negative impact on human health.

What is the scale of the problem?

If we only look at coffee cups, we can get a glimpse into the extent of our disposable cup addiction.

Coffee Cup Usage Around The World

- US: 50 Billion per year
- UK: **2.5 Billion** per year (7 Million per day)
- Aus: **1 Billion** cups per year
- Starbucks: **4 Billion** per year

Do these numbers seem ridiculous? They should, because they are. Remember, these statistics are just based on coffee cup consumption. This doesn't even consider all of the soda, smoothie, and water cup usage.

Why should you be concerned?

If you aren't already a little concerned about what this means for us as humans, consider how this may impact you personally.

Health

- Direct Impact
 - Use of disposable cups may directly influence your physical health due to the plastic chemicals used in their production.
- Indirect Impact
 - Pollution from manufacturing will influence global air quality.
 - Micro plastics can travel up through the food chain and into your diet.

Cost

- Direct Impact
 - Some governments are starting to issue a tax on disposable cups to curb this growing problem which will be passed on to the consumer. (The UK has issued a 5p tax on single use bags and is expected to expand to taxing single use cups)
 - Some vendors such as Starbucks offer a discount for those who bring their own cup, helping you save money.
- Indirect Impact
 - The cost of dealing with the disposal of this tremendous source of waste is paid for with tax dollars.

Environment

- Direct Impact
 - Pollution from single use plastics is plaguing our natural environment, making our outdoor recreation less enjoyable.
- Indirect Impact
 - If this problem doesn't fall on your generation to clean up, it will fall on your children's.

What can you do about it?

The biggest impact you can have is to change your personal habit so you reduce our reliance on disposable cups. Vote with your wallet to show support for a more sustainable future.

- Reduce your dependence on single use cups by bringing your own reusable alternative and/or taking your drinks to go less often.
- Know what a meaningful alternative to disposable cups really is. Not all recyclable and biodegradable claims are authentic.
- Support efforts to solve this problem by giving your business to companies actively seeking a solution.
- Educate others about the issue.