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Picnic Perfect Plastics

by Danielle Masterson

Spring afternoons are perfect for family picnics. But preparation is key--from blocking insects and sun with hats, long sleeves and least-toxic repellents to toting food and water in reusable containers. Plastics are convenient and, though made from petrochemicals, less polluting if you don't toss them and if you choose those that are better for the environment and your health.

How to Choose and Use Better Plastics

Check recycling codes on the bottoms of containers.

Worst

#3 Vinyl or PVC (polyvinyl chloride), which releases carcinogenic dioxins into the environment and can leach hormone-disrupting phthalate plasticizers.

#6 PS (polystyrene), used in coffee cups and take-out containers, can leach styrene, a possible human carcinogen.

Better

#1 PET or PETE (polyethylene terephthalate) containers are recyclable and safe for single use. But studies indicate that with repeated use, PET containers may release di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate, an endocrine-disrupting compound and probable human carcinogen. Recently, some PET bottled-water containers were also found to leach the elemental metal antimony (an eye, skin and lung irritant at high doses), according to the January 2006 *Journal of Environmental Monitoring*. And in an animal study, rats that drank very low levels of antimony for most of their lives died sooner than rats that did not. Although the levels found fell within safe drinking-water standards, study author Bill Shotyk notes that concentrations in bottled water increase over time.

#7 (miscellaneous), includes polycarbonate, a transparent plastic that contains hormone-disrupting bisphenol A, which may stray into contents when stressed by heat or age. Found in Nalgene Lexan and other sports bottles, baby bottles and food containers (see **Handle with Care**).

Best

None of the following plastics have been shown to leach carcinogens or endocrine disruptors.

#2 HDPE (high-density polyethylene) is durable and widely recyclable.

#4 LDPE (low-density polyethylene) is used in some food wraps and sandwich bags.

#5 PP (polypropylene) is popular in reusable containers, though not frequently recycled.

What You Can Do

Avoid leaving water in any plastic bottle in the heat.

Hand wash reusable bottles gently.

Don't reuse PET bottles.

Fill reusable bottles with your own tap water, filtered if necessary (see the **Water Filters Product Report**).

Picnic Products

Best Choices

For an alternative to plastic, try the **Thermos** Stainless Steel Beverage Bottle #2550. With a stainless-steel exterior and interior, it keeps beverages cold or soups, coffee and tea hot 10 times longer than plastic bottles (\$27; www.thermos.com, 800-831-9242). Or try **Sigg's** .6-liter Oval Traveler Reusable Bottle in stainless steel (\$19.95; www.reusablebags.com, 888-707-3873).

Corn-Based Cups and Cutlery (see **Plastics Graduate to Green**):

- **Nat-Ur** Outdoor Picnic Set-10 cups, 10 forks, 10 spoons, 10 knives, fruit "biocontainer" and trash bag (\$10.80; www.nat-urstore.com)
- **Greenware** cold-drink cups (\$8.50/sleeve of 50 12-oz. cups; www.pladirect.com, 303-449-1876)
- Biodegradable cups, cutlery and straws (www.greenearthofficesupply.com, 800-327-8449)

Best Plastics

Food Friendly Favorites:

#2 HDPE:

- **Carlisle** 2-qt. StorPlus square, white food container (\$2.27; www.instawares.com)
- HDPE half-gal., wide-mouth storage container (\$6.95; www.hdpe-containers.com, 800-936-9962)

#4 LDPE and #5 PP:

- **Rubbermaid** Elegan Store and Show Minis (\$9.99/6 3-oz. containers) and 36-cup round Durabowl (\$14.99; www.target.com)
- **Rubbermaid** Serve' n Saver (\$15.49/24-piece set; www.amazon.com)

Wraps:

#4 LDPE:

- **Ziploc** sandwich bags (\$3.29; www.drugstore.com)
- **Saran** Cling Plus (\$2.89; www.drugstore.com)
- **Glad** Cling Wrap (\$3.78; www.amazon.com)

#5 PP:

- **Farberware** 34-piece Family Pack (\$34.99) or 51-piece combo set with lid organizer (\$42.99; www.fryeintl.com/shop, 866-573-3793)
- **Tupperware** Serving Center set (\$28.50; www.tupperware.com, 800-366-3800)
- **Rubbermaid** Durable Solutions small-sized snack containers (prices vary; available at Target and Walgreen's stores)

For Drinks:

#2 HDPE:

- **Nalgene** HDPE round, screw-cap, wide-mouth bottles (\$5.33/32 oz. and \$15.43/1 gal.; www.nalgene-outdoor.com).
- HDPE 32-oz. wide-mouth water bottle (\$8.95; www.hdpe-containers.com, 800-936-9962)
- **Impact** 5-gal. Stackrack jug with faucet (\$9.19; www.instawares.com)

#5 PP:

- **Farberware** 32-piece beverage set (\$29.99; www.fryeintl.com/shop, 866-573-3793)
- **Rubbermaid** Sipp 'N Sport Bottle (\$3.49; www.amazon.com)