

Introduction to Reuse and Refill



Reuse and Refill

While the old adage “reduce, reuse, recycle” is well known, it’s important to emphasize the significance of refill in addressing the plastics crisis. By reusing containers you already have and refilling them with grocery items, you can considerably reduce your reliance on single-use plastic packaging. Shifting away from single-use plastics is critical because there is no “away” when it comes to plastics disposal. Only about 9% of plastics ever produced have been recycled which means that when we’re done with plastic products only a small percentage are used again; most of them end up incinerated, landfilled, in our streets, waterways, and oceans, or shipped abroad.

The detrimental impact of plastics extends beyond their disposal, affecting each stage of their lifecycle. Plastic production is a huge contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and poses health risks to nearby communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Additionally, certain plastics commonly used for bottles, bags, and food containers contain harmful additives like polyfluoroalkyl (PFAs), phthalates (plastic softeners), and Bisphenol-A (BPA), which are associated with adverse health outcomes such as cancer and reproductive disorders.

Reuse and refill systems offer immense environmental and economic potential, despite the limited investment in large-scale infrastructure. Even at an individual level, embracing reuse and refill practices can make a significant impact.

In Berkeley and the East Bay, an increasing number of businesses allow you to bring your own container for refilling. You can choose from a wide range of products and foods available for refill, including personal care items, cleaning products, produce, cooking oils, and dry goods. By participating in these refill programs, you reduce our collective reliance on single-use plastics and contribute to a more sustainable future.

History of Reuse

This practice of reusing and refilling containers is deeply rooted in human history. For generations, people have been bringing their own containers to markets and stores for refilling. Early packaging materials included natural materials like animal skins, reed baskets, wooden boxes and barrels, ceramics, and woven bags. Many might not realize that plastic packaging, on the other hand, is a relatively recent development. Polyethylene terephthalate (also known as PET or plastic #1), commonly used for food and beverage containers, only became widely available in the late 1970s and gained popularity in the 1980s.

Choose Your Container

When selecting a container for refilling, several factors come into play. Consider the container’s durability, weight (especially if you rely on walking or biking), and the type of items you plan to store. Glass containers, though fragile, offer versatility and can be reused indefinitely with proper care. Metal containers also have a long lifespan, but certain foods may react with them, such as salt or vinegar. If you’re new to refilling, repurposing old yogurt containers, peanut butter jars, or coffee tins can be a great starting point. Alternatively, many refill stores offer containers for purchase if you’re in need.

How to Refill and Reuse

The refill process is fairly simple! Bring your container to the desired business and have it weighed. The exact process may vary between businesses, but you can either weigh the container yourself and note its weight or have a store associate assist you. Next, fill the container with your product of choice and proceed to the register for a second weighing. At some stores you may need to label the container with a code for its contents. The weight of your container will be deducted when you make your payment.

factsheet

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If you plan to refill dry goods such as flour, grains, or nuts, having a funnel on hand can be helpful. However, the only essential item you need to get started is simply a container!

Health and Safety

Reuse systems can be safely utilized with basic hygienic practices. In 2020, more than 115 doctors and public health experts released a statement affirming that reusing bags and containers during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a public health risk. Proper cleaning and sanitization of containers and bulk dispensers help prevent the spread of germs. Grocery stores with bulk departments take precautions to minimize cross-contamination, such as using separate tongs or scoops for each product. While these measures reduce the risk, if you have food allergies or sensitivities, it's advisable to consult your healthcare provider. Remember, practicing good hygiene and following any guidelines provided by the store will help ensure a safe and enjoyable refill and reuse experience.

Cost and Impact

Switching to refilling is generally cost-comparable to shopping at traditional grocery stores. Many stores with bulk goods accept CalFresh (SNAP benefits). At scale, reusing and refilling containers can also save businesses money; restaurants in Alameda County, California saved \$139,231 annually by using reusable dining ware. Municipalities can also save taxpayer money by reducing plastic packaging and the cost of cleaning up litter from city streets.

Additional Refill and Reuse Initiatives

Refill and reuse initiatives are gaining momentum globally. For example, Upstream, an environmental conservation organization focused on reuse solutions, offers a directory of services, spanning reusable cup and takeout container services, to larger events and commercial dishwashing services. Other leading zero waste organizations such as Beyond Plastics and the Plastic Pollution Coalition, have launched refill and reuse campaigns, providing toolkits and guidance on avoiding single-use disposable plastics.

Resources

The Last Beach Cleanup and Beyond Plastics, *The Real Truth About the U.S. Plastic Recycling Rate: 2021 U.S. Facts and Figures*.

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Alliance of Mission-Based Recyclers (AMBR), *The False Promise of Plastic to Fuel Technologies*. https://ambr-recyclers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AMBR-The-False-Promise-of-PTF-Technologies_2022.pdf

Paula Hook and Joe E. Heimlich, *A History of Packaging*. <https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/cdfs-133>

Perry Wheeler, *Over 115 health experts sign statement addressing safety of reusables during COVID-19*.

<https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/over-115-health-experts-sign-statement-addressing-safety-of-reusables-during-covid-19/>

ReThink Disposable, *Unpacking Alameda*. <http://www.rethinkdisposable.org/resources>