



Have you ever wondered what the numbers, or recycling symbols mean at the bottom of plastic bottles and containers? Did you know that, while the use of all plastics should be limited if at all possible, some are safer than others? It's time to learn a little bit about the various plastics you use and drink/eat from every single day, and what impact they have not only on you, but also the environment.

Every plastic container or bottle has a recycling symbol. The symbol is a number, ranging from 1 to 7, within a triangle. While you may think nothing of these symbols, they can actually offer a great deal of information regarding the toxic chemicals used in the plastic, how likely the plastic is to leach, how un-bio-degradable the plastic is, and ultimately the safety of the plastic.

Here is some information on the various recycling symbols and numbers:

The Recycling Symbols

Plastic #1 – PETE or PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate)

Picked up by most curbside recycling programs, plastic #1 is usually clear and used to make soda and water bottles. Some consider it safe, but this plastic is known to allow bacteria and flavor to accumulate.

It's found mostly in soda bottles, water bottles, beer bottles, salad dressing containers, mouthwash bottles, and peanut butter containers.

Plastic #1 is recycled into tote bags, furniture, carpet, paneling, fiber, and polar fleece.

Plastic #2 – HDPE (High Density Polyethylene)

Plastic #2 is typically opaque and picked up by most curbside recycling programs. This plastic is one of the 3 plastics considered to be safe, and has a lower risk of leaching.

It's found mostly in milk jugs, household cleaner containers, juice bottles, shampoo bottles, cereal box liners, detergent bottles, motor oil bottles, yogurt tubs, and butter tubs.ilk jugs, detergent bottles, juice bottles, butter tubs, and toiletries bottles are made of this. It is usually opaque. This plastic is considered safe and has low risk of leaching.

Plastic #2 is recycled into pens, recycling containers, picnic tables, lumber, benches, fencing, and detergent bottles, to name a few.

Plastic #3 – V or PVC (Vinyl)

Plastic #3 is used to make food wrap, plumbing pipes, and detergent bottles, and is seldom accepted by curbside recycling programs. These plastics used to, and still may, contain phthalates, which are linked to numerous health issues ranging from developmental problems to miscarriages. They also contain DEHA, which can be carcinogenic with long-term exposure. DEHA has also been linked to loss of bone mass and liver problems. Don't cook with or burn this plastic.

It's found in shampoo bottles, clear food packaging, cooking oil bottles, medical equipment, piping, and windows.

This plastic is recycled into paneling, flooring, speed bumps, decks, and roadway gutters.

Plastic #4 – LDPE (Low Density Polyethylene)

Low density polyethylene is most found in squeezable bottles, shopping bags, clothing, carpet, frozen food, bread bags, and some food wraps. Curbside recycling programs haven't been known to pick up this plastic, but more are starting to accept it. Plastic #4 rests among the recycling symbols considered to be safe.

This plastic is recycled into compost bins, paneling, trash can liners and cans, floor tiles, and shipping envelopes.

Plastic #5 – PP (Polypropylene)

Increasingly becoming accepted by curbside recycle programs, plastic #5 is also one of the safer plastics to look for.

It is typically found in yogurt containers, ketchup bottles, syrup bottles, and medicine bottles.

Polypropylene is recycled into brooms, auto battery cases, bins, pallets, signal lights, ice scrapers, and bicycle racks.

Plastic #6 – PS (Polystyrene)

Polystyrene is Styrofoam, which is notorious for being difficult to recycle, and thus, bad for the environment. This kind of plastic also poses a health risk, leaching potentially toxic chemicals, especially when heated. Most recycling programs won't accept it.

Plastic #6 is found in compact disc cases, egg cartons, meat trays, and disposable plates and cups.

It is recycled into egg cartons, vents, foam packing, and insulation.

Plastic #7 – Other, Miscellaneous

All of the plastic resins that don't fit into the other categories are placed in the number 7 category. It's a mix bag of plastics that includes polycarbonate, which contains the toxic bisphenol-A (BPA). These plastics should be avoided due to possibly containing hormone disruptors like BPA, which has been linked to infertility, hyperactivity, reproductive problems, and other health issues.

Plastic #7 is found in sunglasses, iPod cases, computer cases, nylon, 3- and 5-gallon water bottles, and bullet-proof materials.

It is recycled into plastic lumber and other custom-made products.

The Bottom Line: Which Recycling Numbers to Avoid, Which are 'Safest'

In the end, it's really best to avoid using all plastics if you're able. But at the very least:

Avoid recycling symbols 3, 6, and 7. While Number 1 is considered safe, it is also best to avoid this plastic.

Look for symbols 2, 4, and 5, as these plastics are considered to be safest. These are the plastics to look for in terms of human and animal consumption.

In the end, plastics will still be used, but you can certainly limit your use of the product. Instead of buying plastic water bottles or other plastic containers, choose glass or invest in a high quality water filtration system to obtain your water from. (This is best for your health anyway).