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Eliminate Takeout Containers to Reduce Waste

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Restaurant takeout food containers have a big impact on consumer waste generation every year. Disposable to-go containers of all shapes and sizes, including plastic straws, condiments in plastic cups, plastic knives and forks, ketchup packets, Styrofoam containers and cups, end up in the trash bin and in the landfills afterwards. Making a few changes in your takeout habits can really cut down your **to-go waste**, save energy, and perhaps even keep you slimmer!

Quick Guide: Restaurant Waste from Fast Food Containers

- **Average American's fast food waste:** American diets consisted of only a third takeout or home-delivered only a few decades ago. In 2009, almost 50% of the \$1.2 trillion that Americans spent for food went to food that was taken out from restaurants or delivered to their homes.^[i]

- **National US restaurant container waste:** While the United States does not currently have a formal system for measuring how much waste is generated from restaurant takeout^[ii], a study by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicates that the US generated about 229.2 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2001 and that 32% was attributed to food packaging materials.^[iii]

- **Toxins in Styrofoam containers:** Polystyrene (Styrofoam) is manufactured from petroleum, making it a non-renewable material. What's worse are the toxic byproducts that result from the disposal of this material. The National Bureau of Standards Center for Fire Research named 57 chemicals that are toxic byproducts generated when Styrofoam combusts.^[iv] One of these is benzene which, even in low concentrations, has been linked to incidences of leukemia.^[v]

- **Health hazards of Styrofoam:** Did you know that when Styrofoam materials are heated, they release toxic chemicals such as styrene that can poison your food or your drink?^[vi] According to the US EPA, exposure to styrene can lead to gastrointestinal problems and irritation of the eye and mucous membranes, along with some effects on kidney function.^[vii] The Department of Health and Human Services also reported that Styrene is a likely carcinogen.^[viii]

- **Pizza boxes and recycling challenges:** There are approximately 61,269 pizza outlets in the US and on average each will consume about 55 boxes per day,^[ix] or about 3.36 million pizza boxes every day! Most of these pizza boxes will not end up in the recycling centers due to oil contamination from the pizza inside. After all, water, which is used in recycling, does not mix well with oil. This is the same reason why used paper napkins and plates are not recyclable.^[x]

- **Daily plastic fork and spoon waste:** More than 100 million pieces of plastic utensils are used by Americans every day. These plastic utensils can take up to 1,000 years to decompose, leaking harmful substances into the Earth while they are breaking down.^[xi]

- **Total straws wastes daily:** McDonalds serves 60 million people each day, which means close to that many straws are thrown out daily. Similar staggering numbers of straws are consumed at many other fast food chains every day as well.^[xii]

- **Coffee cups thrown out daily:** Americans drink more coffee than any other nation, consuming more than 400 million cups each day, most of which are taken in disposable cups!^[xiii]

- **Paper towels and napkins tossed daily:** In 2008 alone, it was estimated that 9,500 tons of paper towels or paper napkins are thrown out into landfills daily.^[xiv] Most of these are not fit for recycling due to the oils and other contaminants that are present on them.

Take Action! Reducing the Need for a Takeout Container

1. **Bring your own restaurant takeout containers:** There are plenty of portable and easy-to-clean containers that you can bring with you whenever you dine out. Check out [LunchBots'](#) stainless steel containers, [LunchSkins'](#) sandwich bags, and [Black + Blum's](#) bento lunch boxes. [Reuseit.com](#) is a treasure trove of tools to eliminate your takeout waste!
2. **Practice portion control:** When dining out, you can avoid having to takeout your leftovers if you only order what you can finish right there. You can do this by asking your server how big the portion is and if you think that you might not be able to finish it, ask if they serve half-portions or maybe order something smaller. Alternatively, share a meal with a friend if what you want is too large. You can also avoid takeouts by not going to restaurants without a dine-in option.
3. **Skip the cutlery:** The least complicated way to do this is to use your own utensils whenever you go out. [To-Go Ware](#) and [Bambu](#) are some brands that have some really nice compact and portable utensils made out of bamboo or stainless steel. If you're heading straight home or to the office to eat, ask your server to not include plastic forks, spoons, and knives inside your takeout bag. If you ordered the takeout food so you can consume it during lunchtime at the office, why not purchase and start keeping a set of nice but inexpensive cutlery that you can keep?
4. **Choose a reusable straw or none at all:** Unless you definitely have to use a straw to consume your drink, ask your server to leave it out of your takeout bag. Or buy a reusable, easy to clean straw such as ones from [Wisdom Wands](#) or [Glass Dharma](#) and pack it with you when you go out.
5. **Get your coffee in a reusable mug:** Put your reusable mug in your briefcase, backpack, or vehicle after it's washed to

make sure it's handy the next time you need it. Better yet, have multiples so you have a handy mug available wherever you are. Also, be sure to take advantage of perks offered by companies like Starbucks in the US – they give a 10 cent discount to customers who bring in their own mugs.^[xv] If your local coffee shop doesn't have such a program, encourage them to adopt one!

6. **Cut out the oily bits in pizza boxes:** Most pizza boxes are unrecyclable because of the oil that has already been soaked into their paper fibers. If your pizza boxes come with a film to prevent that oily mess, be sure to recycle your box! If your box isn't completely oil-free, you can cut out the parts that did get soiled and toss the clean portions in your recycle bin. Then throw the oiled cardboard in your compost pile.

Dig Deeper: Recycling Facts for Food Containers

- Be informed about ways the staggering statistics of food packaging waste. [Californians Against Waste](#) has some really good information on this. The US EPA can also provide you with some [interesting facts and figures](#).
- The Institute of Food Technologists provides a good definition of terms related to [food packaging and waste prevention](#).
- LEAD (Leaders in Environmentally Accountable Foodservice) has some tips for restaurateurs on [how to avoid takeout waste](#).
- Find out more about the harmful effects of [styrene](#).

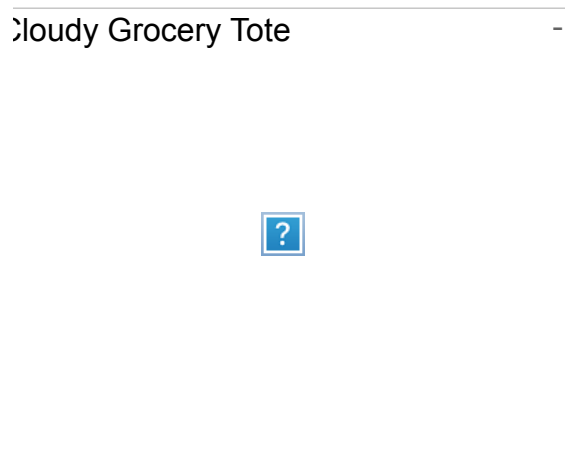
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