

Five everyday waste items that take longest to decompose

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Each waste type has the potential to pollute the environment in a different way and will differ in the time it takes to decompose. This is the reason why some waste materials are more harmful to the environment than others.

"It's critical that consumers take cognisance of the pressure that everyday waste items place on the waste disposal infrastructure and ultimately the environment as a whole," says Leon Grobbelaar, President of the Institute of Waste Management of Southern Africa (IWMSA).

Let's take a look at some common items to see how long they will take to decompose.

1 Plastic Bags

A plastic bag can take anywhere from 500 to 1000 years to decompose in landfills. Plastic waste remains one of the biggest environmental burdens posed on coastal and ocean environments. The Ocean Conservancy's 2018 Coastal Clean-up report¹ indicates that during the 2017 effort to clean-up coastlines, plastic bags ranked as the fifth most picked up item. Four out of the top five items picked up all include plastics (plastic bags, food wrappers, beverage bottles and caps), most of which could have been recycled. A total of 1 503 734 plastic bags were picked up during the 2017 International Coastal Clean-up day.

2 Plastic Bottles

The simple water bottle you purchase at the supermarket can take from 70 to 450 years to decompose. Almost every hour, nearly 250,000 plastic bottles are dumped. It is not surprising that plastic bottles constitute close to 50% of recyclable waste at landfills.² Plastic beverage bottles place an immense burden on the environment if they are not recycled.

3 Aluminium Cans

Aluminium cans take up to 200 years to degrade. Aluminium is one of the easiest and fastest recyclable materials that can be recycled and reused within 60 days. Preparing aluminium products from virgin metal consumes close to 100 times the power required to recycle aluminium, making recycling the more cost- and energy efficient option.²

4 Milk Cartons

Milk cartons are made with paperboard, as well as an insulating layer of polyethylene plastic and a dash of shelf-stable-friendly aluminium.³ When thrown away, milk cartons take approximately five years to decompose.

5. Baby diapers

Disposable diapers can take 500 years to decompose. Apart from the negative effects on the environment due to how long it takes to decompose, diaper manufacturing also contributes to energy waste and pollution due to the large amounts of water and energy used in the manufacturing process.⁴

"Considering the long periods required for decomposition of these everyday waste items, we [IWMSA] encourage households to separate their waste so that it can be recycled and diverted from landfill," says Grobbelaar. "Your recycling system does not have to be complex, you can simply start by separating wet and organic waste (food and garden waste); plastics and glass; and paper into three separate bags or containers."

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