

Plastic

Many plastic products contain compounds known as phthalates, or plasticizers, which enhance flexibility. Added to everything from wall coverings to nail polish, these chemicals have become ubiquitous in our environment—and have found their way into our bodies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported last year that most Americans now have detectable levels of phthalates in their blood. There's not enough evidence yet to determine what long-term effect, if any, these compounds have on our health, but some animal studies suggest they may harm the reproductive system.

What we do know: When you store or wrap food in plastic, small amounts of phthalates migrate into it. High acid content (as in tomatoes) or high fat content (as in cheese) accelerates this process, as does heat—hence, the microwave concern.

You can reduce your exposure to phthalates by microwaving food only in containers and wraps labeled microwave-safe. Plastic products made of 100 percent polyethylene are also phthalate-free. If you want to go the extra-cautious route, microwave in glass containers and cover foods with parchment or waxed paper.

Safer Food Storage

Solve the container conundrum once and for all with these sensible solutions that keep edibles fresh—and minimize your exposure to potentially harmful chemicals.

By Kieran Doherty photographed by Lendon Flanagan

If you're heating up last night's pasta primavera in a plastic container, there's something you should know: Plastic contains chemical additives, some of which can leach out and may increase the risk of birth defects, developmental delays, and certain hormone-related illnesses, such as breast and prostate cancers. According to several university studies, heat releases these harmful additives into the food you're innocently warming up. So don't use plastic—any plastic—in the microwave. Another hot spot is the dishwasher. Washing plastic by hand, in warm water, reduces the likelihood of chemical leaching. Scratches can also increase chemical migration, so don't use abrasive sponges or harsh cleansers on plastic. (Send all scratched plastic containers to the recycling bin immediately.) The good news is there are plenty of other options (some may be in your cupboards already), from stainless steel to old-fashioned waxed butcher paper to safer plastics. Here's everything you need to know.

For Microwaving

Do use microwave-safe glass or ceramic cookware.

Don't use any plastic, including plastic wrap, Tupperware, and Styrofoam.

We Like CorningWare Pop-Ins, made from stoneware, can go from freezer to oven or microwave to your table; 12-piece set, 800-663-8810, cooking.com. Store, heat, and serve in the Anchor Hocking glass storage container, which has a glass lid, 800-663-8810, cooking.com.

For Refrigerator Storage

Do use glass, ceramic, stainless steel, or PVC-free plastic wrap.

Don't use plastic containers for anything that will leave behind a residue that will require scouring, which can create scratches. Don't store or cover hot food in or with plastic—let it cool first.

We Like Easy-to-clean Pyrex glass containers, bedbathandbeyond.com. Betty Crocker stainless

steel bowls in a set of three, 800-328-8360 or bettycrocker.com. Glad Cling Wrap, made from safer number 4 plastic, at grocery stores.

For Packing Your Child's Lunch

Do use foil or waxed or butcher paper to wrap sandwiches and snacks. If you prefer the convenience of bags, look for ones made from number 4 plastic.

Don't use any plastic for high-fat foods such as meat or cheese; plastics contain chemicals that are attracted to fat.

We Like Reynolds Cut-Rite waxed-paper sandwich bags, which are a good alternative to plastic, at grocery stores. Glad sandwich bags made from number 4 plastic are suitable for fruits and vegetables, at grocery stores.

For Water

Do use glass or stainless steel or pitchers made from number 2 or 5 plastic.

Don't use pitchers made from number 7 plastic.

We Like Lehman's European glass juice jars, designed for canning, have lids and keep your water tasting like, well, water. A wide mouth allows easy cleaning; four-piece set of one-pound jars, 877-438-5346 or lehmans.com. The Bormioli Samoa glass pitcher has a chamber for ice built right in, 800-663-8810 or cooking.com.

For Freezing

Do use foil, freezer paper, or number 4 plastic freezer bags.

Don't use any glass or plastic not labeled freezer safe— extreme cold can cause both to crack. Don't put hot food in plastic bags or containers—let it cool first.

We Like Ziploc Freezer Guard Bags, which are made from number 4 plastic and have a seal that keeps out moisture; 15-gallon-size, at grocery stores. For hot food, use Reynolds Wrap Everyday Heavy Duty Aluminum Foil, designed for extreme heat and cold; at grocery stores.

For Pantry Storage

Do use glass, aluminum, stainless steel, or number 5 plastic.

Don't store food in any plastic container made from number 3, 6, or 7 plastic.

We Like Tellfresh containers, made from dishwasher and freezer-safe number 5 plastic. They also have clip-on tags (sold separately) to take the guesswork out of what you stored, thecontainerstore.com. Williams-Sonoma's brushed stainless steel canisters have snug-fitting glass lids for easy viewing; three-piece set, 877-812-6235 or williams-sonoma.com.

The Future of Plastic

Currently, most plastics are made from crude oil. But there's a new generation of plastics made from starches such as rice, corn, and soy. They are biodegradable and recyclable (some are even compostable), and their production is generally better for the environment and your health than that of conventional plastic. The science of converting starch into plastic is not new, but improvements in technology and the rising cost of oil are giving the biotech industry new motivation. Called bio-based, these plastics account for three percent of the \$280 billion plastics market. It's expected to grow to 20 percent by 2010. You may already be using some of them—brands such as Wild Oats, Newman's Own Organics, and Del Monte are using corn-based plastics in their food packaging. There are concerns about the fertilizers and pesticides used in the production of rice, corn, and soy, but on the whole, bio-based plastics are still a more earth-friendly option than their petroleum-based counterparts.

For more information, go to thefarmdepot.com/tfd/bma/departments.jsp.