

Your choice matters

The package you pick can make a difference

By GWEN SCHOEN
McClatchy Newspapers

Paper or plastic? That may seem like a trivial question when you're checking out at the grocery store, but the choice you make can make a difference when it comes to the impact your family makes on the environment.

We face hundreds of decisions every time we do the family food shopping, says Mark Murray, executive director of Californians Against Waste. Paying attention to the packaging our food comes in is just as important as what we eat, he says.

Californians Against Waste is a Sacramento, Calif.-based nonprofit dedicated to conserving resources, preventing pollution and protecting the environment through waste reduction and recycling programs.

"What we encourage people to do when

food shopping is think in three categories: reduce, reuse and recycle," Murray says.

"The first is reduce," he says. "Buy in bulk when possible and avoid overpackaging, which includes things like food packaged in single-serving packages. You can also reduce by cooking from scratch, because buying fresh, unpackaged food reduces waste, reduces transportation impact, and it's better for you.

"Also look for products that are concentrated, such as laundry detergent," Murray says. "It may seem like a small thing, but the package will be smaller, the impact of transporting the product to the store is less and you will create less waste."

Reuse is the next step.

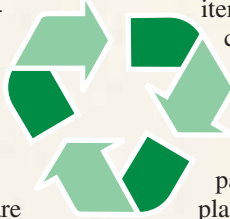
"The first thing that comes to mind is grocery bags. Take your own," Murray says.

"When possible, use your own refillable containers. At some stores you can refill water bottles or even peanut butter containers.

"The next step is recycle," Murray says. "When faced with a choice, try to choose the item that can go into your curbside recycle can. Plastic items that have a recycle number of 1 or 2 on the bottom, for example, can be recycled. If a store offers a choice of containers for things like salad, choose the paperboard container instead of clear plastic, which cannot be recycled."

The whole point is to avoid blindly tossing your purchases into your grocery cart. Think about the impact your selections are making on the landfill and the environment.

We gave Murray a list of common purchases made at the grocery store and asked him to tell us the impact and give us some options.



WIECK MEDIA

The Toyota Prius has an EPA greenhouse gas score of 10, the best score possible.

What's your carbon footprint?

Just about everything you do, from burning a light bulb to washing a load of laundry, has an environmental impact on our planet.

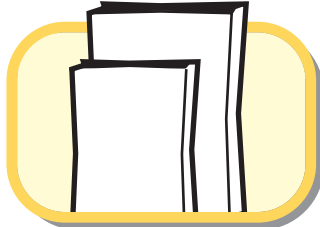
Your "carbon footprint" is a rough calculation of the amount of "greenhouse gases" produced, either directly or indirectly, to support your lifestyle.

For example, when you drive your car, the engine burns fuel that emits into the atmosphere a certain amount of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas related to global warming. When you eat a cheeseburger, you're indirectly contributing to the production of CO₂ based on the energy required to produce, store, transport and cook that burger.

How big is your carbon footprint? To get a general idea, consider the amount of CO₂ generated to support your everyday activities.

— Cynthia Hubert, McClatchy Newspapers

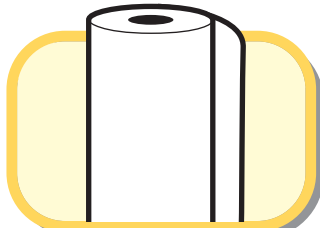
What to know before you go to the grocery store



PAPER VS. PLASTIC GROCERY BAGS

Impact: Plastic bags often end up as non-degradable litter. When they enter the marine environment, they become a threat to animals there. Most curbside recycling programs do not accept plastic shopping bags.

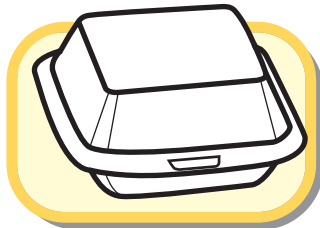
Options: Bring your own bags and use canvas. When that's not possible, choose paper bags, which are almost always made of 40 percent to 100 percent recycled material. Return plastic shopping bags to supermarkets for recycling. When you can carry an item without a bag, skip the bag altogether.



PAPER TOWELS AND NAPKINS

Impact: The manufacturing of paper causes deforestation and consumes fresh water.

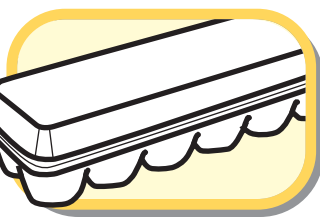
Options: Use cloth dish towels and napkins, which can be laundered and reused. If buying paper towels and napkins, look for ones of 100 percent recycled material; any used to clean up food spills can go in the compost pile.



PLASTIC CLAMSHELL FOOD PACKAGES

Impact: Clamshells, clear or foam, can't be recycled. The packaging increases transportation cost because of increased bulk. Transportation causes pollution and uses petroleum.

Options: When possible, buy items in bulk or packaged in paperboard, which typically is made of recycled material.



EGG CARTONS

Impact: Cartons made of polystyrene plastic polymer (which looks similar to Styrofoam) cannot be recycled and do not break down in landfills. In addition, the manufacturing of polystyrene uses byproducts of petroleum processing, involving a nonrenewable fossil fuel.

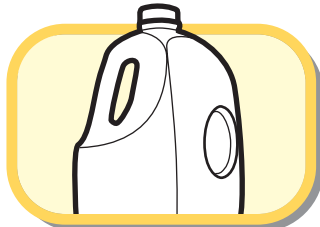
Options: Buy eggs in paperboard containers, which are made of 40 percent or more recycled materials and can be recycled in curbside-collection programs.



WATER BOTTLES

Impact: The International Bottled Water Association, a trade group in Alexandria, Va., reports that last year, Americans drank 8.25 billion gallons of bottled water. Energy is used to manufacture and transport bottles to market, which uses fossil fuels.

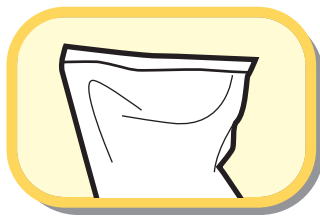
Options: When possible, bring tap water from home in a reusable container. When you buy bottled water, make sure you recycle the container.



MILK JUGS

Impact: When plastic jugs are recycled, there's little impact. But the polycoated paper used for milk products and frozen food cannot be added to curbside recycle trash in some communities.

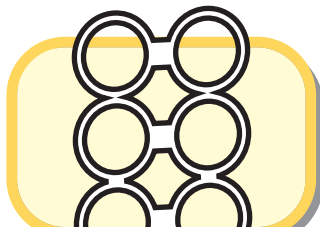
Options: Plastic food containers that have the number 1 or 2 on the bottom, such as milk jugs, can be recycled. Only a few communities are able to recycle the gable-style, polycoated paper cartons, so choose plastic and recycle.



FOOD STORAGE BAGS

Impact: Like plastic grocery bags, they often end up as litter and can't be recycled. Over time, they will break down into smaller pieces, but they never disappear.

Options: There are few options other than using reusable, rigid plastic containers that can eventually be recycled. When using plastic food-storage bags, try to reuse them as many times as possible before discarding them.



SIX-PACK RINGS

Impact: When they end up in marine environments or in wildlife areas, they can cause distress to animals. They are photodegradable under perfect conditions, according to Murray, but that can take months or years.

Options: At the very least, take the time to cut apart the rings to prevent animals from becoming trapped.



TRASH CAN LINERS

Impact: They have not degraded yet in our history, according to Murray. At best they break down into smaller and smaller pieces over time. This applies even to those labeled as biodegradable.

Options: Use paper grocery bags when possible. Make good use of compost piles. If you can't compost, place wet garbage into curbside cans and deal with the yuck factor.

GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC GOODWIN/MCT

LIVING AREAS

- TV sets, DVD players and cable boxes create up to 1,608 pounds of CO₂ per year.
- If you turn them off when you're not using them, you can cut that output by 240 pounds.
- Computers generate up to 497 pounds of CO₂ per year. Turn them off when you're not using them and save 43 pounds.

KITCHEN

- A refrigerator is the biggest energy-user in the kitchen:
- A 1992 top-freezer model with 19-21 cubic feet of space emits 754 pounds of CO₂ per year.
- A 2002 side-by-side model with 19-21 cubic feet of space emits 442 pounds of CO₂ per year.
- Replacing an old refrigerator with an Energy Star model can eliminate hundreds of pounds of CO₂ per year.

DINING ROOM

- If you get 30 percent of your calories from meat, dairy and poultry, as most Americans do, your diet contributes more than 3,275 pounds of CO₂ to the environment each year.
- Replace red meat with fish, eggs and poultry and save 950 pounds.
- Go vegetarian and save 1,600 pounds.



LAUNDRY ROOM

- Drying clothes in an automatic dryer is a big source of CO₂ emissions in your home:
- If you run your dryer 10 times per week, you produce 822 pounds of CO₂ per year.
- If your dryer has a moisture sensor, you can reduce CO₂ output by 15 percent.
- Or dry your clothes on a clothesline instead.

BATHROOM

- If you take an eight-minute shower every day, you create 1,368 pounds of CO₂ annually.
- By shaving two minutes off of your shower time, you can shave that amount by 342 pounds.

GARAGE

- **2007 Toyota Prius:** 4-cylinder hybrid with automatic transmission and 2-wheel drive
EPA greenhouse gas score: 10 (best score possible)
Grams of CO₂ per mile: Less than 296
- **2007 GMC Yukon 1500:** 8-cylinder gasoline engine with automatic transmission and 2-wheel drive
EPA greenhouse gas score: 3 (with 10 being the best possible score)
Grams of CO₂ per mile: 669 to 730

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

For a more specific comparison of how your footprint compares to others, you can plug your personal information into a calculator created by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Go to: www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind_calculator.html.

To check your vehicle's greenhouse gas score, go to www.epa.gov/emisweb.

SOURCES: ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY; ENERGY STAR APPLIANCES; THE GREEN GUIDE; THE NATURE CONSERVANCY.