

Could you survive without plastic for a whole week?

BAGS OF CHOICE
Hattie Garlick and family, right and below, ditched plastic

It's the 'scourge of our time', but is it really feasible to live (and shop) plastic-free? Hattie Garlick finds out

Last week, the Prime Minister vowed to crack down on "one of the greatest environmental scourges of our time" and eliminate all "avoidable" plastic waste within the next 25 years. In the UK alone, she said, the single-use plastics thrown away each year would fill the Royal Albert Hall 1,000 times over. I believe it. Because in my own dominion – albeit a family of four in a small terrace house – we are drowning in plastic.

The floor is strewn with plastic toys. For this, I can blame the kids (aged four and seven). But in my fridge too, nearly every item is packed in the stuff (including a plastic tray in which each piece of Parma ham is blanketed by its own plastic sheet). The bathroom is packed with potions and lotions in plastic. I have a cupboard entirely devoted to "bags for life".

This cannot continue. Unlike the PM, however, I decide not to wait until 2042, but to call the children and my husband downstairs and announce an immediate ban on all single-use plastic packaging. For a week, at least.

FRUIT AND VEG

According to the Cucumber Growers Association, 490 tons of plastic is generated every year, merely to cover cucumbers in British shops. Lidl has just

then placed in plastic to preserve their dignity – while Marks & Spencer has stopped selling "cauliflower steak" after customers pointed out it was just a couple of slices wearing a herb dressing, plastic wrapper and higher price tag. I head to Waitrose to buy fruit and veg, and make my first mistake: taking a ravenous four-year-old. She points to a plastic punnet of raspberries. "Now, why can't we have those?" I ask, piously. "Because fishes' tummies end up full of plastic," she intones, leadenly.

An estimated 12.7 million tons of plastic end up in the world's oceans each year – thus, plastic is now found in a third of UK-caught fish. Frida knows this because I gave her a lecture in the car about it. She is, however, struggling to empathise with the cod because: "My own tummy is empty," she points out, threateningly.

So we pick up loose bananas. At 14p each, these are nearly 3p cheaper than those wrapped in plastic. However, it costs nearly 10p more to buy each of our apples now that we cannot buy their bagged cousins. This, it turns out, is typical. Last week, a study found that over half of supermarket vegetables are cheaper if wrapped in plastic.

Despite being resigned to pay more, we leave without a quarter of our shopping list. Frozen peas (the children's staple vegetable) are obviously out. Cucumbers are, indeed, near impossible to find unpackaged. Lettuces too. And celery, berries, grapes...

The local market proves more, well, fruitful. We emerge with a perplexing array of root veg and cabbages. Of course, I have no idea what I'll cook, and I have just devoted two hours to hand-selecting loose items that I usually purchase in a few online clicks. Seeking advice, I call Alice Guy, MD of video games company PaperSeven and mother of two, who survived the whole of 2017 without plastic.

"When you start, it feels like a mara-

dicted." You cannot, she explains, shop spontaneously when plastic-free. Instead, she spends part of each Saturday writing a weekly meal plan, then hitting the various shops near her East Sussex home where she knows she can get things without packaging.

"There's only one place I can buy celery without plastic," she says, "and another where I can get cucumbers." Now that Alice has planned her route, she thinks shopping this way adds only a little time – and enormous satisfaction.

"I think about the huge volume of plastic we haven't generated," she says, "and the fact that about 95 per cent of the money I've spent has been at local businesses, going back into the local economy. I'd never preach to others about our way of life, but it's hugely rewarding."

DRINKS

Half way through the week, I am woken to the sound of my two children, leaping up and down and screaming: "He's been! He's been!" Not Father Christmas, one month late: the milkman. Two days





previously, we had run out of milk. All the supermarket supplies came in plastic bottles, so I bought soy milk in a cardboard container and placed an order with the milkman. It being Friday evening, he couldn't deliver till Monday, so the children endured 48 hours of "torture" without cow's milk. Our new, glass-bottled milk is expensive (99p a pint, compared with 60p for Sainsbury's plastic-bottled version). But this seems important since I have received an email from Helen Bird, recycling and collections adviser at the waste-reduction charity WRAP. "Around 3.7 million tons of plastic is placed on the UK market each year," she says. "Of this, packaging accounts for 2.2 million tons." The worst offender, she explains is

the plastic bottle, which accounts for 39 per cent of the packaging consumers use. Pots, tubs and trays make up 34 per cent and films 27 per cent.

Globally, our plastic bottle addiction means we buy a million every minute. Fewer than half of the UK's end up in recycling. Instead, more than 16 million are burnt daily, or left to litter the landscape or oceans. Armed with this information, the nuisance of remembering and carting around reusable water bottles seems negligible. I add a reusable coffee cup to my bag, too.

Then, I discover there is plastic in my tea bags. Eliminating plastic is hard now that it is so ubiquitous - you can't even see its presence in some products. This thought depresses me, until I

y,
use
on.

ILLUSTRATION: TOM MCGUINNESS



I discover there is plastic in my tea bags. Eliminating plastic is hard now that it is so ubiquitous

remember that there is one drink that comes almost entirely in glass: wine. The virtuous are rewarded after all.

MEAT AND FISH

It is, I discover, relatively easy to buy meat and fish. Not on the supermarket aisles, of course, but at the deli counter a kind, if mildly amused, assistant agrees to put my salmon and sausages directly into the paper package, foregoing the usual plastic film.

My local butcher and fishmonger are equally affable, even after I pedantically object to the sticky labels sealing their paper parcels. The only hurdle is ham. I cannot find anywhere selling it unpackaged. Our sandwiches look sad.

SUPERMARKET PLASTICS YOU SHOULD AVOID

Simon Ellin, CEO of the Recycling Association, on the worst offenders in your shopping trolley

BLACK PLASTIC MEAT TRAYS

These cannot be picked up by infrared technology at material recycling facilities due to their carbon black colour.

TUBES OF CRISPS

Looking at you, Pringles. These tubes are made of a cardboard outer, metal lining, metal base, foil and paper strip and plastic lid. Ergo, extremely difficult to recycle.

DISPOSABLE COFFEE CUPS

These are often laminated with plastic or polythene to make them waterproof. There are a couple of mills in the UK that can recycle them, but collecting them in large enough quantities to make it economically viable is tough, since they tend to be consumed on the go, then thrown into any old bin along with the stirrer, plastic lid - and a splash of coffee, too.

WRAPPING PAPER

If this really was paper, it would pose no problem. But a huge quantity of the wrapping paper we buy is actually plastic based. Plus, it finds its way to recycling plants complete with tape and glitter, which can contaminate entire loads.



SANDWICH BOXES

Or anything with a plastic window bonded to cardboard, since they cannot be recycled together and each tends to contaminate the other.



PLASTIC STRAWS

In theory, recyclable. But infrared technology at the recycling plant picks out shape, polymer and colour to ensure that different plastics are collected separately for recycling. Straws are too small to be picked out.



COTTON BUDS

Same problem. Plus, since they are a mixture of paper or cotton with plastic, one contaminates the other.



SINGLE-USE SACHETS

Unlike a glass bottle of ketchup, a single use sachet of the stuff cannot be properly washed out. So they will almost always contain residues of the highly contaminating sauce inside.

FOOD POUCHES

Baby food pouches, sauce pouches... These are made of several different materials bonded together so are completely unrecyclable.

Tesco, I catch my husband casting
tive glances at his beloved, plastic-
shrined Parma ham.

DRIED GOODS

On Tuesday, Iceland announces it will
become the first supermarket to elimi-
nate plastic from all its own-brand
products. This week, however, it
proves impossible to buy most dry
goods in the major supermarkets.

We gaze at entire aisles of pasta,
noodles and rice, their plastic wrap-
ping winking provocatively at us un-
der the strip lighting. Even the cereals
have a plastic bag within their card-
board boxes. We buy Scotch Oats and
Veetabix before retreating.

Then, I spot a sign for a business
called Reyouzable. Currently available
only in certain London postcodes but
aiming to expand, it works like this.
You order unpackaged dried goods
plus some cleaning products and toi-
letries) via its website. They deliver to
your home or a local collection point,
after which you can decant your sup-
plies from paper bag to your own jars.

I meet founder, Gavin Prentice, for a
coffee. Reyouzable, he says, is less than
a year old, but website traffic is now
"going through the roof, partly because
of *Blue Planet*".

"We're getting emails asking us to
deliver to new areas of London, to
Cambridge, and to the north of Eng-
land," he tells me. There is, however,
one problem. Cost.

Four hundred grams of its organic
basmati rice currently costs £2.61. At
Sainsbury's 500g costs £1.90. "When
we started, I wanted to match super-
market prices exactly," says Gavin,
"then reality set in."

Supermarkets' vast purchasing
power enables them to push prices
down dramatically. Until Theresa
May's dream of "plastic-free aisles" ma-
terialises, eliminating plastic means
using smaller, independent shops and
services - and thus higher prices.

Gavin, however, is optimistic. Re-
youzable's growth, despite the cost dis-
parity, shows just how sharply the tide
of public opinion is turning when it
comes to plastic packaging. That
growth, he hopes, will enable prices to
fall fast.

Plus, he says: "You don't have to
ditch all plastic. Most people can't
afford to at present. Switch a cou-
ple of products, and you'll help
to put pressure on the big sup-
pliers and supermarkets to
make the whole thing easier
and more affordable."

SNACKS

The biscuits, sweets and yogurts
my children crave are swathed in
plastic. I promise to bake instead.

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Mindful that this is not my strong suit,
I immediately "forget" to do so, and no
one reminds me.

Instead, I take to carrying bananas
and raisins everywhere. At the end of
the week bananas, raisins and receipts
have combined to form a resilient
papier-mâché at the bottom of
my handbag.

BREAD AND CHEESE

The supermarket deli counter comes
to the rescue once again. I buy a thick
wedge of cheddar, wrapped in paper.
It disappears at an alarming rate (pos-
sibly due to the lack of other snacks),
so I buy more without event at a
farmer's market.

But I have become too cocky. It
seems seductively simple to buy loaves
of bread in paper bags at local bakeries.
On Sunday, friends are due for lunch. I
read through the recipe and realise I
need pitta bread.

I have failed to follow the first rule
of plastic-free shopping: plan ahead.
The bakeries are closed. I am forced to
buy plastic-wrapped pitta from a cor-
ner shop. The lunch tastes of failure
and landfill.

DETERGENTS AND TOILETRIES

At my most downcast, I stop at a local
health food shop and discover, within,
a treasure trove. Dried goods are
housed in dispensers, from which you
can fill paper bags.

There is a vat of olive oil, from which
you can fill your own bottle, one for
apple cider vinegar, yet another for
honey and a whole "refilling station"
for cleaning products of all kinds. A
wave of elation washes over me.

I fill up on laundry and washing up
liquid and buy bamboo toothbrushes
for the children. Then, from natural
cosmetics chain Lush I get shampoo,
conditioner and deodorant bars in
paper bags.

Last year, Lush sold five million
shampoo bars, preventing the
production of more than 15 million
plastic bottles (each shampoo bar gives
about three times the washes of an av-
erage bottled shampoo).

In fact, there is only one thing I have
failed to find plastic-free: toothpaste.
Glass jars are sold online, but the
week's end is approaching and I
cannot wait for delivery.

So, buoyed by a newfound
feeling of resourcefulness, I at-
tempt to persuade my children
to try a homemade concoction
of baking soda, coconut oil and
peppermint oil. They back away.
"Oh go on," I say, "What do I have
to bribe you with?"

A glint appears in my son's eyes. "A
toy," he says. "A big, plastic toy."

CLEANING UP
Cosmetic chain
Lush sold five
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bars last year

