

Life without plastic

January 2 2009, By Trine Tsouderos

Amid a recent flurry of worrisome reports about plastic, a simple question came up: Could we live without it? Could my typical family - a mom, a dad, a 3-year-old girl and a 7-month-old boy - put aside the very material of American lives, the products that greet us after birth in the diapers we wear and usher us out at death in the body bags we are zipped into?

Could we break this addiction?

I decided to try. For one week, I pledged to buy no new plastic and to keep the kids away from it as much as possible.

It meant putting away the plastic kids utensils and plates and princess sippy cups and pacifiers. It meant bringing our own bags to stores and forgoing Dunkin' Donuts coffee and fun-size candies. It meant cooking more and relying less on food that comes frozen in plastic bags.

So daunting did it seem that on the day before I started, I binged like a dieter snarfing cookies. Two Target bags to pick up dog poo. Fruit snacks out of plastic bags. Gatorade and Vitaminwater from plastic bottles. The clothes at Macy's came on plastic hangers, and when the clerk offered a plastic bag to take them away, I said, "Yes!"

"Nobody likes change," Peter Lobin of eco-friendly Solid Waste Solutions Corp. had told me. "But I think the world is changing."

"Plastic Pete," as Lobin refers to himself, was right. But could I turn

away from products that were raising so many health and environmental questions?

There was Canada's ban of the chemical bisphenol-A in plastic baby bottles. There was news that melamine, a chemical compound used to make certain kinds of plastics, was found in eggs, infant formula and milk from China. And, of course, there's the fact that plastic doesn't degrade for hundreds of years.

So, we would do it. We would take a household - our family of four - that on average buys or discards 200 plastic items a week and try to turn it plastic free.

"No one can do the whole thing in one week," warned Beth Terry, an accountant from Oakland, Calif., who blogs about trying to live the plastic-free life at fakeplasticfish.com. "I hope you will stress to your readers that the best way is to take it one step at a time. Otherwise, they might give up in frustration."

Indeed. By the end of my plastic-free week, I had cut our family's plastic consumption dramatically - and unexpectedly and delightedly lost weight. On the downside, my bank account also got leaner.

I started the experiment at Whole Foods: Two stainless steel water bottles for a total of \$45 and a \$9 all-rubber pacifier. Papery diapers and biodegradable dog poo bags from Target. A hockey puck-shaped bar of shampoo at LUSH that smells like jasmine for \$9.25. And to replace baby wash, soap that smells like honey and goes for nearly \$40 a pound.

Going plastic-free clearly required an outlay of cash. But now, the stage was set.

DAY ONE

I wash my hair with the shampoo bar, put my son in a paper diaper and talk up the new Hello Kitty stainless steel sippy cup that has replaced my daughter's mystery-plastic princess one. Smugness sets in as my girl swigs milk from Hello Kitty and my boy sucks on his rubber pacifier, content.

Then I hit a wall. My 3-year-old wants breakfast. Everything we eat is wrapped in plastic except for bananas, oatmeal and salt. She wants none of these things. I feed her cereal out of a plastic bag with milk from a plastic jug.

I have trouble finding lunch without plastic. I go without. I drink nothing at work. I don't have a non-plastic cup. Food is going to be a problem.

I talk to Katrina Davidson, who keeps a blog called Kale For Sale. She lives outside San Francisco and accidentally became plastic-free when she started eating local.

"It's about not going to the grocery store. At the grocery store, everything is packaged. All of the berries are in plastic containers. The lettuces are all in plastic. The mushrooms."

Davidson goes to the farmers' market and brings her own containers. After doing this for a while, she realized she wasn't creating much plastic garbage.

"You know, it was happening for a while before we consciously realized it," she said. "And the first time it happened, we said, 'God, can we do that again?'"

DAY TWO

Despite Davidson's warning, I drive to Whole Foods, which boasts of its

efforts to be green. Surely, Whole Foods will have plastic-free options.

So why does it seem everything is wrapped in plastic?

I buy the most random assortment of groceries: A bottle of banana mango drinking yogurt, a bottle of cider, two pounds of bananas, a turkey meatloaf, flax cookies, three red potatoes, two tomatoes, eggs, a variety pack of oatmeal and a box of pretzel crackers from a company called Eco Heaven.

The company's motto is "The best crackers in the world, the best crackers for the world." The crackers themselves are in the shape of a hybrid car, a sun (for solar energy), a wind turbine and the planet Earth.

The best crackers for the planet are also in a plastic bag.

"We tried to find something more eco-friendly from a packaging perspective," said company President James Sego. "But if we used a super biodegradable material, we would have two weeks of shelf life." And those crackers need to be able to sit on the shelf for nine months, he said.

DAY THREE

I wash three Ziploc bags and dry them inside out.

DAY FOUR

I clean the house with baking soda, a mix of water and vinegar and a little balsam fir essential oil from Aura Cacia I got at Whole Foods that cost \$13. Our now-clean house smells like salad dressing and Christmas.

DAY FIVE

Target Day. Potential plastic disaster looms.

Our last pre-plastic free trip to Target had produced 13 plastic shopping bags, one plastic bag of Halloween candy (all wrapped individually in plastic), one plastic bag of plastic disposable razors, two boxes of cereal in plastic bags, three plastic bags of frozen mangoes, two plastic bags of plastic-polyester kids pajamas and two plastic princess-themed sippy cups encased in a plastic shell.

This time, my husband volunteers to go: "OK, so what do we need? Bagels?"

"No! We need to get those from the bagel store, which sells them in paper bags."

"What about bread?"

"No! We need to get that from the bakery. And you need to take our plastic shopping bags with you. Use those."

He rolls his eyes.

The day gets worse. We decide to go back to plastic Pampers at night. The paper ones have leaked three nights in a row.

DAY SIX

My vow to avoid plastic ends not with a bang but with a small Dunkin' Donuts decaf topped by a plastic lid that will degrade in hundreds of years. The coffee tastes bitter and I feel guilty. This is the first time I have purchased something plastic that was not necessary.

That night, I lie awake, unable to sleep. The coffee, I conclude, had

probably been regular and full of caffeine. Karma.

DAY SEVEN

I notice my jeans are looser, probably because I haven't been snacking on anything for seven days because almost all snacks come in plastic. I like this.

EPILOGUE

At the end of the plastic-free week, I estimated that we had cut our plastic consumption in half. To celebrate, I made a lasagna, guiltily using ingredients that came in some form of plastic. Living completely without plastic, it seems, is nearly impossible.

"Until you become aware of it and you are looking for it, you don't realize it," said Terry, the Oakland accountant who catalogs every piece of plastic she uses on her blog. "And then you realize how everything is plastic."

I am hyper-aware of plastic now. It's like I can smell it.

And so I continue to use paper diapers. I try to reuse Ziplocs. I tote my steel water bottle to work, and my daughter continues to love hers. I use the shampoo bar, and I clean the house with vinegar and baking soda. When I shop, I try to bring my own bags, and I let my produce roll around in my cart, plastic bag-free.

But I do sneak a Dunkin' Donuts coffee every so often. And I still end up with a lot of plastic when I shop.

The big difference: I feel a twinge of guilt when I do.

One of the hardest but also one of the most interesting and at times rewarding aspects of trying to live plastic-free was finding alternatives. Here's some of what I learned:

(Note: Prices may vary.)

Instead of: Plastic bottled water, \$1.25 each

I tried: Sigg stainless steel bottle, \$24.99 for a 33-ounce bottle, \$19.99 for a 13-ounce

Verdict: Seems steep for a water bottle, but it wouldn't take long for this to pay off. Too bad the screw cap on the 33-ounce bottle and the spout on the 13-ouncer are plastic. Still, a yes.

Instead of: Pine-Sol, \$3.49 for 28 ounces, Windex, \$3.99 for 26 ounces

I tried: Vinegar and water, \$1.99 for 32 ounces

Verdict: Works great. Vinegar leaves a salad-dressing-y smell but fades quickly. An enthusiastic yes.

Instead of: Soft Scrub, \$4.49 for 24 ounces

I tried: Baking soda, 99 cents for a 16-ounce box

Verdict: Did an amazing job on the stainless steel kitchen sinks, and a good job in the tub too. Needs a good rinse of water after using, though, to get rid of powdery film. A keeper.

Instead of: Pampers Cruisers, 25 cents a diaper

I tried: Nature Babycare diapers, 33 cents a diaper

Verdict: The paper diapers are more expensive (\$500 more over 2½ years), and leak at night. But it's hard to argue for the forever plastic diaper. This is a maybe.

Instead of: Plastic shopping bags, free

I tried: Nature Babycare bags, 50 for \$2.96

Verdict: We used our shopping bags to pick up dog waste and wrap up dirty diapers. But these biodegradable bags do the job, too, and aren't that expensive. A yes.

Instead of: NUK pacifier, \$4.50 for 2

I tried: EcoPiggy's Ecobinky, \$8.99

Verdict: A lot of cash for something that gets lost so often. A no.

Instead of: Organix Coconut Milk Shampoo, \$6.99 for 13 ounces

I tried: LUSH Godiva shampoo bar, \$9.25 for a hockey puck size bar

Verdict: Love it. It actually works, it smells divine, like jasmine. A yes.

Instead of: Johnson's No More Tears Head-to-Toe Baby Wash, \$4.49 for 15 ounces

I tried: LUSH Honey I Washed The Kids soap, \$7.95 for 3.5 ounces

Verdict: Delicious honey-soaked scent makes this pricey bar of soap almost worth the money. Almost. A no.

Instead of: Playtex Nurser System \$5.19 for one 8-ounce bottle plus \$4.99 for drop-in liners

I tried: BornFree glass baby bottle, \$10.99 for one

Verdict: Comparable cost when you consider how much you'll pay for those liners over time. Still, glass? No.

For my experiment in living without plastic, I kept track of what plastic my family bought and tossed during a normal week, and then did the same during the week we tried to avoid plastic. An accounting:

Number of plastic items discarded or purchased in our typical week: 200

Number of plastic items discarded or purchased in our plastic-free week: 88

Number of Pampers used in typical week: 42

Number of Pampers used in plastic-free week: Three

Best day, typical week: 16 items tossed or bought

Best day, plastic-free week: Six items tossed or bought

Worst day, typical week: 56 items tossed or bought (Reason: Trip to Target)

Worst day, plastic-free week: 34 items tossed or bought (Reason: Trip to Target)

Plastic shopping bags gathered, typical week: 24

Plastic shopping bags gathered, plastic-free week: 1

Number of new Ziploc bags used, typical week: 6

Number of new Ziploc bags used, plastic-free week: 0

Number of care packages received during plastic-free week: 1

Contents of that package: 2 plastic magic wands, 1 plastic package of plastic princess hair accessories, 1 plastic bag of baby shoes, 1 plastic baby driving toy

Number of plastic lids from small decaf coffees with cream and sugar from Dunkin' Donuts, typical week: 2

Number of Dunkin' Donuts coffee lids, plastic-free week: 2

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Citation: Life without plastic (2009, January 2) retrieved 7 February 2026 from
<https://phys.org/news/2009-01-life-plastic.html>

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