



Time to wake up and smell the coffee (cup waste)

2023: Plastic Free July invites Australians to break their addiction to disposable coffee cups by upping their coffee cup game. Recent estimates from the government show takeaway coffee cups lined with plastic, and their lids, are now one of the most used single-use plastic items in the country with recent research finding [1.84 billion single-use cups used each year](#).

A new survey commissioned by the not-for-profit Plastic Free Foundation revealed that a large majority of Aussies regularly buy their coffee from cafes (88% of adults) and live their lives 'on the run' with 84% of cafe coffee drinkers consuming take away coffee. Only a third of cafe coffee drinkers 'always' or 'usually' opt to use a BYO reusable cup or participate in a cup exchange scheme despite 100% of them owning a BYO cup.

"Coffee cups have taken the lead as Australia's most used single-use plastic item in the country. While we will always make great coffee and we value the cafes and baristas behind our coffee culture, now is the time to wake up to the impact of our daily disposable addiction." said Rebecca Prince-Ruiz, Founder and Executive Director of Plastic Free July.

In response to more people realising that single-use cups aren't readily recycled and looking for easy ways to avoid them, Plastic Free July's [Choose to Up Cup coffee cup challenge](#) during July helps people, businesses and cafes take small steps that will make a big difference.

"By switching from the disposable cup we use for a couple of minutes to instead bringing our own cup for takeaways or choosing to dine-in, the Aussie coffee lover can avoid 500 single-use cups a year!"

"It's as easy as choosing to 'Bring, Borrow or Stay. To up your cup game, bring your own cup from home, borrow or swap one from some cafés, or take ten minutes and stay and enjoy your favourite cuppa in-store" said Prince-Ruiz.

WWF-Australia and the Plastic Free Foundation have released a briefing paper '[Disposable Coffee Cups: Our Unhealthy Addiction](#)' to coincide with the Choose to Up Cup challenge outlining the problem and policy options to increase reuse and decrease consumption of single-use cups.

"The majority of single-use coffee cups end up as landfill or as litter on our beautiful beaches and in our oceans. Once in the environment they break up into microplastics, which cause lasting harm to wildlife and marine ecosystems," said Kate Noble, No Plastics in Nature Policy Manager, WWF -Australia.

"It's great to see the impact Plastic Free July is having at community level, but we need more concerted action from governments and businesses to drive Australia's reuse economy and ultimately phase out harmful, disposable products."

In addition to the environmental impacts, there is increasing concern and research being done on the human health impacts of single-use plastics to be taken into consideration.



“Switching from single-use to reusable cups made from ceramics, glass or stainless steel coffee drinkers is a healthier choice, which can avoid microplastics entering drinks and the potential leakage of harmful chemicals that could be in plastic cups or plastic linings. In general, avoiding plastic cups is another way we can reduce both harmful chemicals and microplastics in the environment and in our bodies,” said Prof. Sarah Dunlop, Head of Plastics and Human Health at Minderoo Foundation

Join the [Choose to Up Cup coffee cup challenge](#) during July and invite friends, family and colleagues to get involved too.

Notes to editors

Sustainability of single-use coffee cups

Opting for a bio-friendly disposable cup doesn't sound too bad but sadly there is no 'good' disposable cup that fits with the principles of a circular economy as single-use cups aren't readily recyclable and too few compostable cups currently end up in composting facilities - meaning most end up in landfill or are littered and become plastic pollution.

Paper-based disposable coffee cups are generally made with virgin paper and lined with plastic (petroleum-based or bioplastic). They are not widely accepted for recycling with paper and cardboard. They are used for several minutes, then the cup and lid are discarded.

We are currently seeing a shift away from conventional plastics for coffee cups towards and compostable cups and lids. Many retailers around the country have transitioned to compostable cups, driven by sustainability concerns rather than regulatory requirements.

National agreement has been reached on eight problematic and unnecessary single-use plastic products to be phased out in Australia by 2025 but coffee cups and lids are not on the nationally agreed priority list.

Western Australia has phased out single-use plastic-lined coffee cups, and other jurisdictions are considering phasing out this product.

COVID Safety

Use of disposable plastic products has increased during the global pandemic, due to uncertainty about safety of reusables and confusion over regulations and requirements.

However in 2020, around 120 health experts from more than 20 countries endorsed a [Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19](#). This evidence-based statement found surface contact to be relatively low risk for transmitting COVID-19 and that disposable products have a similar risk profile to reusable ones. They argued 'it is clear that reusable systems can be used safely by employing basic hygiene' and set out best practices for reusable products in the retail space.



One of Australia's pre-eminent epidemiologists, Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, stated at the height of the pandemic that 'As long as baristas are practising good hand hygiene ... are regularly washing their hands and not touching the rim of the cups then they should still be used. ... We can do two things at once – take care of our health and reduce our impact on the environment. There is simply no excuse.'¹

About the Plastic Free Foundation

We're a not-for-profit global social movement that stops around 300 million kgs of plastic polluting the world each year. We share Plastic Free solutions with people and organisations so that we can all take action to end plastic waste and enjoy a healthy world. In 2022 3.6 million Australians joined an estimated 140 million people from 195 countries worldwide choosing to refuse single-use plastic in July and beyond.

Contact details

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¹ Atherfold Finn, J. and Prince-Ruiz, R. (2020). Plastic Free: The inspiring story of a global movement and why it matters. 244-255