

Reducing waste



More than one million tons of garbage is generated in Hennepin County every year. From packaging and junk mail to excess paint and food scraps – it takes a lot of time and money to deal with all of that waste. Waste reduction is any method used by a consumer or producer of a product to reduce the amount of solid waste that will require recycling, composting, incineration or disposal. In other words, if something is never created or you don't buy it, you don't have to decide how to reuse it or dispose of it.

When considering the hierarchy of waste management, preventing waste is the best thing we can do to protect the environment, even before reuse and recycling. From choosing not to buy a product, learning to repair an item, buying used, or using reusables, we can prevent waste in a lot of ways.

Rethinking what we buy

When you go shopping, you probably aren't thinking, "I'll buy some garbage today." But depending on which products you choose, that might be what you're doing. By purchasing items that are overly packaged, disposable, or of poor quality, your cash can soon end up as trash.

Every product manufactured impacts the planet. Manufacturing products requires resources and contributes to pollution. Waste prevention involves changing consumption habits and production methods to conserve resources.

When we must buy, we can reduce the environmental impact by purchasing durable and made-to-last products, looking for products with recycled content, choosing to reuse products instead of buying new, and selecting products with minimal packaging.

Durable versus disposal products

How durable or disposable a product is will determine its longevity and environmental impact.

Durable products include clothing, furniture and tools. These products are designed to be used over and over again, and we can maintain and repair them to ensure longer product life. Only at the end of their useful lives do durable products wind up in the solid waste stream. How well a product is made and maintained determines how soon it will need to be discarded and replaced with a new product.

Disposable products include items like paper or plastic dishes and utensils, non-rechargeable batteries, and personal-hygiene products. Disposable products are designed and produced to be used only once and then discarded. Hospital supply products, such as disposable syringes and gloves, were among the first disposables to appear on the market. They were promoted as being more sanitary than their durable counterparts, and their use is almost universally accepted as a health care standard. Eventually, the use of disposables expanded from hospitals into homes. Disposable home products are more often touted for their convenience rather than hygiene. They were originally intended to serve as backups to durables, not as substitutes. Paper towels, for example, could capture the occasional big spill. In most homes today, paper towels have replaced their reusable cloth predecessor. Likewise, disposable diapers were initially intended for use during travel. Now many parents use disposables all the time. Gradually, these and other disposable products have all but replaced their durable counterparts.

Product obsolescence

A much subtler form of disposability is durable products that have been designed for obsolescence. There is quite a difference between an item that is truly worn out and one that is obsolete only because it was poorly made, is out of fashion, or has been upstaged by an "improved" version with "new and exciting" features. Planned obsolescence is now common in many industries, most notably clothing, sporting equipment, home interiors, automobiles and electronics.

Although design and marketing for obsolescence increases sales for manufacturers, it has the ultimate and unsustainable effect of turning otherwise durable products into quickly replaced and then disposed of commodities. Planned product obsolescence contributes to our waste problem and increases consumption of energy and natural resources. We can change it by rethinking what we purchase and considering what we really need.

Packaging

Products are not the only waste-generating goods. Product packaging constitutes a large portion of the household waste stream and is a significant contributor to roadside litter. Containers and packaging make up more than 30 percent of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream.

Packaging has different purposes and functions, some of which are critical while others are not. Packaging may be used for product protection, identification and marketing, or convenience.

Glass, paper, plastic, aluminum, steel and wood are commonly used packaging materials. Some packaging, such as metal cans, glass bottles and jars, boxes, and plastics bottles, cups and containers, are relatively easy to recycle. Other packaging, such as plastic bags and wrap, foil and Styrofoam™, are not easily recyclable and often end up in the trash.

Making smarter purchases

Many external influences, such as marketing and product manufacturing, shape our purchasing habits and discourage waste reduction. Becoming aware of these influences is a necessary first step in changing our behavior.

We live in a society where the old saying, “use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without” has been replaced by marketing strategies that encourage impulse buying, and people often make purchasing decisions with little prior thought or planning. As a result, we may buy products that aren’t as useful as we had thought, and these purchases become clutter and eventually waste.

Pre-cycling is a three-step process that encourages waste-reduction purchasing by considering our purchases before we make them.

Pre-cycling involves:

1. Decide what you need

Before making a purchase, consider:

- Why do I want this?
- How often will I use it?
- What are my alternatives to this product?
- Can I get along without it?
- What will I give up (e.g., time, money) in order to buy this?

2. Consider alternatives to buying new

- Could you purchase used, rent, borrow, repair or repurpose an item instead of buying new?

3. Select the best product and package

If purchasing new is the best option, employ selective shopping by considering:

- Will this product last?
- Is it made with sustainable materials and manufacturing processes?
- Is it repairable?
- Is it a classic? Will I be happy with it years from now?
- What will happen to it at the end of its life? Can it be recycled or composted?
- Is the product free of unnecessary packaging? Is the package refillable or recyclable?

Ten ways to reduce waste

1. **Use reusables.** Bring a reusable mug with you to the coffee shop, use a refillable water bottle and use a reusable bag everywhere you go shopping – not just at the grocery store, but retail, clothing, hardware stores and more! Pack a no-waste lunch by using a reusable lunch box or bag and reusable containers instead of plastic bags or disposable containers. Don’t forget to use cloth napkins and reusable silverware.
2. **Borrow, rent and shop used first.** Before you run to the store to buy a new item, think about how much you will use it. Could you borrow one from a friend or neighbor, rent it at a local store or purchase it used? Items to consider borrowing or renting include ladders, party supplies, yard care and camping equipment, library books and more. Items to buy used include kitchenware, appliances, clothing, furniture, toys, musical instruments, and sports and camping equipment.
3. **Buy well, buy once.** Well-designed and constructed products that are repairable will last longer and usually save you money, even if they cost more initially. Consider buying cloth diapers, refillable razors, refillable pens, cloth napkins, towels and rags, cast-iron pots and pans, covered food containers, travel mugs and rechargeable batteries. Think about resisting trends and fashions and consider your purchases an investment.
4. **Maintain and repair** your household items, such as shoes, clothing, appliances, electronics, furniture, tools and automobiles. Learn repair skills and get help fixing your items at a Hennepin County Fix-It Clinic (www.hennepin.us/fixitclinic).
5. **Sell, give away or donate** usable clothing and household goods. Donate reusable items to a local thrift store or charitable organization, hold a rummage or yard sale or resell items online. Check the Choose to Reuse Directory (www.hennepin.us/choosetoreuse) for options.
6. **Reduce food waste.** Organic waste, which includes food waste and food-soiled paper, makes up about 30 percent of our trash. You can reduce food waste by using up what the food you already have, planning your menu and grocery shopping, freezing or preserving

the food you cannot use up right away, and composting fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, plant trimmings and more in a backyard compost bin or participating in an organics recycling collection program.

- 7. Minimize packaging and avoid disposables.** At the grocery store, buy in bulk and bring bags or containers to fill. Choose products with the least packaging over individually wrapped items. Check out Hennepin County's Packaging Waste Reduction Learning Trunk at www.hennepin.us/environmentaleducation for hands-on educational resources on reducing packaging waste.
- 8. Get your name off of junk mail lists.** The average household receives as much as 60 pounds of unwanted mail every year. See the Hold the Mail handout to find ways to get off junk mail lists to reduce the amount of unwanted mail you receive.
- 9. Green your celebrations.** From Thanksgiving to New Years, household waste increases 25 percent. The additional food waste, packaging, wrapping paper and decorations adds up to one million tons of garbage a week nationwide. Green your celebrations by using reusable serviceware, meal planning to reduce food waste, providing recycling for your guests and giving green gifts. Avoid over-packaged, resource-consuming gifts that will need batteries or electricity. Consider making a gift, sharing an experience, providing a service or giving an environmentally friendly product. Check out Hennepin County's Green Your Parties Learning Trunk at www.hennepin.us/environmentaleducation for hands-on educational resources to aide in greening your celebrations.
- 10. Find creative ways to reuse items,** such as making note pads from scrap paper, repurposing glass jars or plastic tubs into canisters, relabeling envelopes and more!

