

WHAT ARE YOU PAYING FOR?

Packaging makes up about 30 percent of our trash. Some packaging, including paper, boxes and plastic packaging from toys and electronics, is recyclable. However, a lot of packaging, including plastic bags and wrap, foil, and Styrofoam, is not easily recyclable.

A lot of products are available in small portions that have a lot of packaging. These products, while claiming to increase convenience, also greatly increase the cost of the product. For example, individually packaged, snack-sized bags of potato chips cost about twice as much as buying the same amount of chips in a larger bag. Choosing products with minimal packaging saves money and reduces the amount of waste produced.

Outcome

Participants will learn the economic and environmental costs of purchasing overly packaged food and drink products.

Audience

Youth (ages 8+), adults

Time

20 - 30 minutes

Concepts

- Look for less packaging and avoid disposables.
- Choose products with the least packaging over individually wrapped items.
- These choices don't just help the environment; purchasing items with less packaging saves money!

Supplies

- Examples of food and beverage items that are individually or overly packaged (snack packs, individual servings, etc.) and the same or similar products with less packaging such as bulk portions or family-size quantities. Some examples include chips, crackers, sweetened drinks, cookies, popcorn and raisins.
- Receipt from grocery shopping
- Two baskets, boxes or bags of equal size
- Paper and pens/pencils
- Calculators (*optional*)
- Examples of containers for buying and storing in bulk and packing food in reusable containers for lunches, snacks, etc. (*optional*)



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Preparation

Separate the examples of more packaging and less packaging into separate baskets, bags, boxes or piles. Create a chart or list of the prices you paid for the items that participants can see.

Procedure

- Ask participants how they make decisions about what they buy. Do they take taste into account? Healthfulness? Convenience? Size? Packaging? Price?
- Divide participants into small groups and distribute “less waste” and “more waste” examples of the same products to each group. Ask them to describe the differences they see. Ask them to guess the price of the different items.
- After the participants guess the costs of items, reveal the list of prices.
- Collect all the items from participants in two baskets, boxes or bags (one for “less waste” and one for “more”), or set the items into two different piles. Determine the total cost for each basket and discuss the difference in waste (for example, the “less” waste items may cost about 60 percent less than the same food and drinks in the “more” waste pile).
- If time permits, discuss buying items in bulk and packing food in reusable containers. Explain how to find the weight of the container by first weighing the empty container and how to label containers for check out.

Discussion questions

- Was anyone surprised by the difference in the prices? What did you already know about this?
- Why are some items packaged in individual containers? What price do we pay for convenience (economic, environmental)?
- What are the alternatives to buying individually wrapped containers? (Buy durables, not disposables. Use reusable containers.)
- How can you alter your lunch or snack to produce less waste?
- What are the challenges with buying food with less packaging (time, convenience, etc.)? Does anyone have experience addressing these challenges?
- Does anyone’s family buy larger portions or in bulk? Why? (Save money, reduce waste, etc.) What do you buy in bulk? Where do you get it?
- How can you make a less-packaged product more convenient? (When you need a smaller amount for a lunch or snack, take the food from the large container and place it in a smaller, reusable container.)
- Will you share information you learned with anyone else? Who will you share it with?
- What more do you want to learn about these issues?



Additional activity ideas

Investigate the life cycle of products

- Have participants investigate the life cycle of a product – from the extraction of raw materials through manufacturing, use and disposal. Consider common items that may be made of numerous materials, such as a pen or permanent marker, electronics, clothing, etc.
- Have participants research the types of materials this product is made of including where the materials are sourced and how the product is manufactured. Have participants consider:
 - What materials is this product made of? Where did these materials come from? Were they mined, produced in a factory, grown on a farm?
 - How were the different materials manufactured into the product?
 - How far did the materials and/or product travel to get to the consumer?
 - What will happen to the product when we are done using it? Is the product or parts of the product recyclable?
 - Could a similar product be used that has less environmental impacts?
 - Was there any information you couldn't find or was difficult to find?

Participants can create posters or visuals to share their findings.

Grocery store detectives

- Take participants to a store and ask them to help find products that are individually or overly packaged and minimally packaged.

Ask participants to find multiple products in each of these categories:

- no wrapping (e.g. apple)
- one wrapping (e.g. bread)

- two wrappings (e.g. cereal)
- three or more (e.g. frozen meals, snack packs)
- Have participants discuss less packaging alternatives to the items they found. Which items have an less packaging alternatives? Which do not?

Design less-wasteful packaging

- Using examples from the packaging activity or any other product of interest, challenge participants to research and design packaging that would be less wasteful. Ask teams to present their packaging ideas to the entire group.

Reducing waste at your organization

- Look for ways to reduce waste within your organization, especially with groups that meet regularly as a class, team, group, etc. Considering auditing the waste generated by the group or within your organization in order to identify the best waste reduction actions. Some actions include:
 - Commit to bringing reusable mugs and bottles instead of disposal cups. Consider tracking the number of disposable cups avoided every time the group meets with a “Saved Cup Tally.”
 - Serve snacks in bulk or with less packaging.
 - Use reusable foodware, including bowls, cups, plates, silverware, cups and napkins. If your organization doesn't have enough, ask participants to commit to bringing their own.
 - Reduce paper use by limiting handouts.
 - Track your progress to see how much waste the group prevents!

Resources

Tour the Hennepin County Drop-off Facility in Brooklyn Park

This tour highlights the importance of reducing, reusing, recycling and preventing pollution. Students will learn about the materials accepted at the Hennepin County Recycling Center and Transfer Station and witness what happens to the materials first-hand. They will also learn about the proper ways to dispose of and handle household hazardous waste. Available for grades 2 and older. Visit www.hennepin.us, search: tours.

Packaging Waste Reduction Learning Trunk

This learning trunk demonstrates the cost differences and packaging waste when purchasing single-serve items versus those packaged in bulk or concentrate. It also addresses packaging recyclability. Learn more at www.hennepin.us/environmentaleducation and check out the learning trunk for free by calling 612-348-4168.