

Microplastics are In Your Poop

According to a recent study presented at the 26th United European Gastroenterology (UEG) Week, the plastics surrounding the food we eat has now made it into our gut. Researchers from the Medical University of Vienna and the Environment Agency Austria tested eight volunteers from a variety of countries, including Finland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, the U.K., and Austria. These volunteers were asked to keep a food diary for a week leading up to having a stool sample taken. Of the 8 volunteers, none of them were vegetarian, and six reported eating sea fish. After analyzing the samples they collected, researchers confirmed that every single volunteer had microplastics in their stool. Scientists identified nine different kinds of plastics, including polypropylene (PP), polyethylene-terephthalate (PET), and others. Dr. Philipp Schwabl is the lead researcher who presented the findings at the 26th UEG Week.

This is the first study of its kind and confirms what we have long suspected, that plastics ultimately reach the human gut. Of particular concern is what this means to us, and especially patients with gastrointestinal diseases. While the highest plastic concentrations in animal studies have been found in the gut, the smallest microplastic particles are capable of entering the blood stream, lymphatic system and may even reach the liver. Now that we have first evidence for microplastics inside humans, we need further research to understand what this means for human health."

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Where Is It From?

The researchers of this study chose to focus on food packaging. Plastic food packaging is everywhere. In 2013, the plastic industry produced 78 million metric tons of packaging and only 28 percent of that was recycled. The amount of non-bottle plastic packaging containers (dairy tubs, deli containers, lids, etc.) recycled in the U.S. reached nearly 1.3 billion pounds in 2015. If that number is 28 percent of all of the non-bottle plastic in the U.S., the total amount of plastics directly touching deli meats, dips, spreads, sandwiches, and other popular foodstuffs is roughly 4.6 billion pounds. How do you avoid that?

It's possible to limit your exposure to plastics through the food you eat. Shopping at the farmer's market, bringing your own packaging to stores, and choosing items packaged in paper or glass are all potential options. That's not the only way a person is exposed to microplastics, though. Water is another avenue of exposure. An analysis of popular bottled water brands found that 90 percent of them contained microplastics. The actual water bottle could be the source of those pieces, but a study of the water in major metropolitan areas found that 83 percent of samples contained plastic microfibers.

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We Are the Fish Now

Microplastics enter our environment through a myriad of ways, like cosmetics, manufacturing processes, fishing gear, and packaging. Once microplastics are in the water, they are impossible for fish and other marine life (including coral) to avoid and can sometimes even get stuck in gills. These plastics are more than an irritant. They also contain BPA and other similar substances and can disrupt the endocrine system and cause serious health concerns.

We've known about plastics pollution in the oceans since the 1960s and 70s. Our use of it has increased dramatically since then. Four years ago, it was estimated there were between 15 and 50 trillion pieces of plastics in the oceans, and scientists have been discovering significant amounts of plastic in whales, birds, and fish. This study is confirmation that we are no different.

Related: *Many Hand-me-down Plastic Toys Are Toxic for Kids*

Sources:

- *In a first, microplastics found in human poop* – National Geographic
- *UEG Week: Microplastics discovered in human stools across the globe in 'first study of its kind'* – United European Gastroenterology
- *Guess What Is In Your Poop: Plastic, Suggests A Study* – Forbes
- *Fifteen Plastic Packaging Statistics That Will Scare You* – Ribble
- *Food and Beverage* – Plastic Packaging Facts