

Microplastics in Sea Salt – A Growing Concern

When it comes to long-term thinking for the health of the planet, humans often fall short of common sense. Plastic, one of the most durable products in the world, is consistently used for products no one actually wants to last forever, like single-use grocery bags and cheap children's toys. The ever-increasing amounts of plastics glutting the planet today are leading to dire consequences for many natural spaces, especially the ocean. Worst of all, the overabundance of plastic particles is starting to make it into our diet in the unlikeliest of ways- sea salt.

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The Rise of Plastic in the Ocean

Every year, roughly 13 million metric tons of plastic finds its way into the ocean. A study from 2014 found that there are more than 5 trillion pieces of plastic in the ocean, and over 90 percent of them are less than a quarter inch long. Called microplastics, these tiny pieces tend to pose the biggest threat because they are often eaten by plankton and other small creatures and quickly make their way through the food chain to larger fish, birds, and other species.

Previous research on the levels of microplastics in the ocean has revealed that the quantities are unexpectedly high in seafood like fish and clams. However, recent research has discovered that microplastics are also detectable in sea salt.

Contamination in Sea Salt

A survey of 16 brands of sea salt from eight countries revealed to researchers that microplastics were present in all but one brand. Published in *Scientific Reports*, this research team found trace amounts of the plastic polymers polypropylene and polyethylene. In all, the research revealed that the tested salt contained about 1,200 plastic particles per pound. Most of these particles were found to be fragments of old plastic products, fibers, and paints that were broken down to their small size in the ocean, which ruled out the possibility that the sea salt packaging itself was to blame.

The Impacts for Human Health

In general, sea salt is considered a healthier alternative to regular table salt. Found to strengthen the immune system, improve heart health, and decrease the symptoms of asthma, many people believe that using sea salt is better for their bodies than other, refined varieties of salt. However, the prevalence of plastic in many sea salt brands might be a reason to be concerned.

Microplastics are a threat to organisms because their small size makes it easy for them to absorb organic pollutants and store them in the bodies of those that eat them. Yet there's little reason for you to worry about the negative health effects of plastic-tainted sea salt, as the amounts of microplastics found in salt are so low that they are not considered a health risk. Researchers estimate that most people swallow fewer than 40 particles of plastic in sea salt every year, compared to the estimated 11,000 particles that shellfish lovers likely consume each year. Somewhat reassuringly, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) classifies polypropylene and polyethylene-based plastic polymers as safe for human consumption at these levels.

The Overall Damage for the Environment

In many ways, the danger of microplastics in sea salt doesn't come from the risk for your body, but from what they mean for the rest of the planet. Plastic has become so prevalent in the world today that it's hard to find places without it. From the ocean floor to the ice in Antarctica, microplastics are increasingly polluting natural spaces, and their long-term impacts on the world are still far from understood. If plastic particles can wind up in your salt shaker, there's no telling where else it will soon be found.

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- *Diatomaceous Earth – Mother Nature's Secret Weapon: What Is It, How to Use It, Where to Find It*

Sources:

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- *Most Sea Salt Contains Microplastics, Study Finds – Treehugger*
- *Are Microplastics in Your Sea Salt? – The Alternative Daily*
- *The Presence of Microplastics in Commercial Salts from Different Countries – Nature.com*
- *Even Your Sea Salt Contains Microplastics – Ecowatch*
- *Even Your Sea Salt is Almost Certainly Contaminated with Plastic – Quartz*