

Is it safe to microwave food in plastics?

A "microwave-safe" or "microwavable" label on plastic containers only means that they shouldn't melt, crack or fall apart when used in the microwave. These labels do not guarantee that containers don't leach chemicals into foods when heated; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not regulate these labels and has not developed any standards for them. As a precaution, toxicologist Lisa Lefferts always avoids using plastic in her microwave. "Plastic plus hot plus fat is the worst combination," she advises. "That's because most chemicals that leach from plastic are lipophilic (they love fat) and high temperature speeds up the leaching process into the fat."

For safety's sake, it's best not to heat foods in plastics. Ceramic or oven-proof glass (such as Pyrex) dishes with lids provide safe and effective substitutes. To ensure thorough heating (which kills harmful microbes), be sure to use lids. Never microwave food in margarine tubs, yogurt cups or other containers, such as styrofoam.

Grilled Cheese *and Plastic?* Sandwich

Cheese, deli sandwiches and vegetables swathed in cling wrap; meat and poultry on Styrofoam trays; ice cream, margarine, and tofu in plastic cartons: Every day, most of us eat food that has come into contact with plastic. And as most of us have learned by the age of two, you're supposed to eat the food, not the wrapper. Yet an advertisement from the American Plastics Council calls plastics "an important part of your healthy diet," noting "you could think of them as the sixth basic food group." While the ad means to draw attention to plastic's widespread use in food packaging, it ironically echoes recent studies showing that some plastic packaging does leave residues of chemicals on foods stored or heated in it. In some cases, these chemicals have been linked to cancers and abnormal sexual development in animals.

"I wouldn't want anyone I cared about to eat plastic chemicals in food," says Joan Dineen, an interior designer and mother of two in New York City, who worried about leaching plastics. Happily, as Joan discovered, you can [avoid problem plastics](#) by making only a few simple changes to your daily routine. Safer choices, both plastic and non-plastic, are readily available.

Avoiding Unpalatable Plastics

Although scientific evidence on leaching chemicals doesn't yet exist for all plastics, and all plastics used in contact with food have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, little research has been done. Until we have more information on the effects of long-term exposure to all chemicals that migrate, or leach, from plastics into food, consumers may want to take general precautions, while avoiding those plastics that have been linked to health problems. For example, *Consumer Reports* recommended that [plastic wrap](#) not touch food when heating it — a precaution with which even the plastics industry agrees.

Problem Plastics

There are three general points to keep in mind:

1. Potentially harmful chemicals that leach from plastic readily do so into foods containing fats, such as cheese and meat.
2. [Heating fatty food in plastics](#) can cause greater leaching.
3. For the sake of the environment as well as our personal health, it's best to reduce use of all plastics in food packaging and other products.

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