

ASK YOUR COMMISSIONER: **Can NJ restaurants still give out plastic straws?**

Our restaurant server automatically gave us plastic straws with our drinks. But we heard that restaurants aren't supposed to give out plastic straws anymore. So what's the scoop on plastic straws in New Jersey now?

Your server should not have given you those straws. There is a new state law (PL 2020 c.117) that prohibits businesses from automatically providing plastic straws or stirrers to patrons unless requested. So if you didn't ask for your straws, you should not have gotten them. Paper, bamboo, or other reusable straws and stirrers can be used instead.

Plastic straws are a primary source of trash found in our waterways and beaches. Since straws can last for up to 200 years before decomposing, a disposable plastic straw used for just an hour can linger afterwards for decades as trash in our environment. Plastic straws are not compostable, either – they just last and last and last.

Other plastic products will also be banned, under the new law, beginning in May 2022. This includes plastic disposable grocery bags, as well as paper bags at larger stores (2,500 square feet or more - to encourage customers to bring their own reusable shopping bags). Since New Jersey uses over 4 billion plastic bags each year, this restriction can dramatically clean up our beaches and parks. Polystyrene disposable products (sometimes called Styrofoam) such as hot coffee cups, take-out containers, egg cartons, and meat trays, will also be banned next year. Plastic cutlery falls under this 2022 prohibition too.

There are some exemptions. Now, pre-packaged products with straws, like juice boxes, are still allowed. Next year, plastic bag exemptions include those used for grocery produce, uncooked meats, sliced deli products, and dry cleaning will still be allowed, as will plastic bags for newspaper delivery, sales of live animals like fish, and prescription drugs.

Used plastic bags frequently end up as trash, blowing across our roads and yards before the rain washes them into the nearest street catch basin, and out into our waterways. Rivers carry the plastic bags into our oceans, where they drift for twenty years or more before they degrade, endangering marine life through entanglement or accidental consumption. Why not start using alternatives to plastic bags right now, in preparation for the 2022 ban? Reusable bags are an easy solution.

Polystyrene containers are handy for takeout food, but these can take up to fifty years to degrade. They will break down into hundreds of tiny microplastic bits during the process. These lightweight particles are easily airborne and become widely dispersed. Some microplastic bits end up in our waterways, where they are mistakenly consumed by marine animals who think they are food. The result is protracted harm to the environment as well as aquatic life.

Some businesses have already eliminated using plastic straws. Starbucks simply re-designed their cup lids to have a drinking lip instead of a straw hole, thus avoiding the need for a straw at all. And some customers have already adjusted too, by just drinking out of the side of the cup, or bringing their own reusable straws when they go out. These simple solutions can have big impacts.

Single-use plastics like straws and bags result in interminable and substantial pollution. The new ban will help reduce our dependence on these products, and it's a small price to pay to protect our environment.

~Jody Sackett