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Do you wear a plastic mask? Here are 5 things you should know



The pandemic is hitting the battle against plastic pollution hard. Image: Unsplash/Brian Yurasits

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- Face masks have become part of our daily life as a result of the coronavirus pandemic,
- But aside from limiting the transmission of COVID-19, disposable plastic masks are having a devastating effect on the planet, adding to the world's growing plastic problem.

The fight against plastic pollution is being hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the use of disposable masks, gloves and other protective equipment soars, but UN agencies and partners insist that, if effective measures are put into place, the amount of plastics discarded every year can be significantly cut, or even eliminated.

1) Pollution driven by huge increase in mask sales

The promotion of mask wearing as a way to slow the spread of [COVID-19](#) has led to an extraordinary increase in the production of disposable masks: the UN trade body, [UNCTAD](#), estimates that global sales will total some \$166 billion this year, up from around \$800 million in 2019.

Recent media reports, showing videos and photos of divers picking up masks and gloves, littering the waters around the French Riviera, were a wake-up call for many, refocusing minds on the plastic pollution issue, and a reminder that politicians, leaders and individuals need to address the problem of plastic pollution.

2) A toxic problem



Manta rays in Bali, Indonesia navigate through plastic pollution.,

Image: UN World Oceans Day/Joerg Blessing

If historical data is a reliable indicator, it can be expected that around 75 per cent of the used masks, as well as other pandemic-related waste, will end up in landfills, or floating in the seas. Aside from the environmental damage, the financial cost, in areas such as tourism and fisheries, is estimated by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) at around \$40 billion.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has warned that, if the large increase in medical waste, much of it made from environmentally harmful single-use plastics, is not managed soundly, uncontrolled dumping could result.

The potential consequences, says UNEP, which has produced a series of factsheets on the subject, include public health risks from infected used masks, and the open burning or

uncontrolled incineration of masks, leading to the release of toxins in the environment, and to secondary transmission of diseases to humans.

Because of fears of these potential secondary impacts on health and the environment, UNEP is urging governments to treat the management of waste, including medical and hazardous waste, as an essential public service. The agency argues that the safe handling, and final disposal of this waste is a vital element in an effective emergency response.

“Plastic pollution was already one of the greatest threats to our planet before the [coronavirus](#) outbreak,” says Pamela Coke-Hamilton, UNCTAD’s director of international trade. “The sudden boom in the daily use of certain products to keep people safe and stop the disease is making things much worse.”

3) Existing solutions could cut plastics by 80 per cent

However, this state of affairs can be changed for the better, as shown by a recent, wide-ranging, report on plastic waste published by The Pew Charitable Trusts, and sustainability thinktank Systemiq.

The study, “Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution”, which was endorsed by Inger Andersen, head of the UN environment agency UNEP, forecasts that, if no action is taken, the amount of plastics dumped into the ocean will triple by 2040, from 11 to 29 million tonnes per year.

But around 80 per cent of plastic pollution could be eliminated over this same period, simply by replacing inadequate regulation, changing business models and introducing incentives

leading to the reduced production of plastics. Other recommended measures include designing products and packaging that can be more easily recycled, and expanding waste collection, particularly in lower income countries.

4) Global cooperation is essential

In its July analysis of plastics, sustainability and development, UNCTAD came to the conclusion that global trade policies also have an important role to play in reducing pollution.

Many countries have introduced regulations that mention plastics over the last decade, an indicator of growing concern surrounding the issue, but, the UNCTAD analysis points out, for trade policies to be truly effective, coordinated, global rules are needed.

“The way countries have been using trade policy to fight plastic pollution has mostly been uncoordinated, which limits the effectiveness of their efforts, says Ms. Coke-Hamilton. “There are limits to what any country can achieve on its own.”

5) Promote planet and job-friendly alternatives



Alternative face coverings can be less impactful on the environment. Image: UN

Whilst implementing these measures would make a huge dent in plastic pollution between now and 2040, the Pew/ Systemiq report acknowledges that, even in its best-case scenario, five million metric tons of plastics would still be leaking into the ocean every year.

A dramatic increase in innovation and investment, leading to technological advances, the report's study's authors conclude, would be necessary to deal comprehensively with the problem.

Furthermore, UNCTAD is urging governments to promote non-toxic, biodegradable or easily recyclable alternatives, such as natural fibres, rice husk, and natural rubber. These products would be more environmentally-friendly and, as developing countries are key suppliers of many plastic substitutes, could provide the added benefit of providing new jobs. Bangladesh,

for example, is the world’s leading supplier of jute exports, whilst, between them, Thailand and Côte d’Ivoire account for the bulk of natural rubber exports.

“There’s no single solution to ocean plastic pollution, but through rapid and concerted action we can break the plastic wave,” said Tom Dillon, Pew’s vice president for environment. As the organization’s report shows, “we can invest in a future of reduced waste, better health outcomes, greater job creation, and a cleaner and more resilient environment for both people and nature”.

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