An Unexpected Source Of Microplastics In Your Kitchen

4 MIN READ

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Your kitchen sponge is shedding microplastics. But it’s not the first place to start if you want to cut back on your exposure.

What do brains, breastmilk, and bones have in common? **Microplastics** have been found in each of them. That’s not exactly unique — these tiny plastic particles have been found all over the world and in most of our organs. According to **Harvard experts**, they’re in our “trash, dust, fabrics, cosmetics, cleaning products, rain, seafood, produce, table salt, and more.”

A new **study** published in the journal *Environmental Advances* found that kitchen sponges are another unexpected source of microplastics in the kitchen.

“Kitchen sponges that contain plastics will release microplastics. The higher the plastic content, the more microplastics are released,” **Leandra Hamann, PhD**, lead author of the study and a scientist in the field of zoology, biomimetics, and microplastics at the University of Alberta, Canada, tells Super Age.

You may find it overwhelming to hear yet *another* study on the ubiquity of microplastics. That’s fair, given what we know about microplastics and our health. But don’t give up just yet: there are two causes for optimism regarding sponges specifically — plus four simple ways to meaningfully reduce your risk of microplastic exposure in the kitchen.

“Suspected” Link Between

Microplastics and Cancer

Scientists are still learning how microplastics harm our health. Here's what we know so far: microplastics are **"suspected"** to hurt our reproductive, digestive, and respiratory systems and may contribute to lung and colon cancer, according to a 2024 review published in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*. Another 2024 study found that patients with **microplastics in their artery plaques** had a higher chance of stroke, heart attack, and death compared to those without microplastics.

But there's still a lot we don't know about the connection between these plastic fragments and our health. Instead of throwing up your hands and giving in to the plastic takeover, experts advise focusing on the areas you can control.

"People have to look at this in a holistic way and realize that plastic is everywhere. If you're really concerned about your health, the first place to start is being careful about the food you eat and making sure that it is not in plastic, and then don't use cosmetics or anything that has it deliberately added," **Michael Hansen, PhD**, a senior scientist at Consumer Reports, tells Super Age.

How Concerned Should I Be About Microplastics in Sponges?

You may find two crucial facts comforting after reading the research on microplastics in sponges.

First, the scope of the problem: The sponges in the study were found to shed between 0.682 and 4.212 grams of microplastics annually. Using rough-estimate, real-world weight equivalents, this means the scale ranges from the size of a single chocolate M&M to a nickel over the course of a year.

Next, the microplastics' ultimate destination: Hamann explains that while people may consume some portion of the sloughed-off microplastics from sponges, the majority of these particles end up in agricultural fields as sludge from wastewater treatment, with a small amount remaining in treated freshwater.

No amount of microplastics is ideal in our bodies *or* our environment — and of course those stored in our soil and water can eventually make their way back to us. But if you're imagining a direct pathway from our sponges to our bodies, you'll probably rest a little easier knowing that the quantities are small, and they're largely headed down the sink drain.

Sponges Are Not the Top Microplastic Source in Your Kitchen

Yes, plastics are everywhere, and it's worth taking a moment to think about all of the sources of plastic in your kitchen. You might have plastic in your cutting boards, utensils, pots, pans, and blenders. If you only focus on sponges, you're kind of missing the forest for the trees, Hansen said.

Take tea bags, for example. A study found that one **plastic tea bag** can release 11.6 billion microplastics and 3.1 billion nanoplastics into your tea. Microwaving your food in plastic containers is also a huge problem. After **three minutes in the microwave**, one square centimeter of plastic can release 4.22 million microplastic and 2.11 billion nanoplastic particles.

"We know that the most damaging particles are actually the ones in the nanometer range, because if you inhale them, they go deep into the lungs, they can go into cells, they can cross the blood-brain barrier, and they can get into nuclei," Hansen warns.

4 Ways to Cut Back on Microplastics in Your Kitchen Today

With so many potential sources of microplastic exposure, it's hard to know where to start cutting back. There are four simple ways to start limiting your kitchen exposure today:

- **Replace Non-stick Cookware, Plastic Utensils, and Sponges.** Sponges may not be a top source of microplastics in your kitchen, but you may still want to replace them with ones made with natural fibers. You can also replace your plastic kitchen tools with stainless steel and wood products and your non-stick pans with those made from safer materials.
- **Drink Tap Water.** A liter of bottled water can have as many as **240,000 tiny plastic pieces** — primarily the more dangerous nanoplastics. Avoid bottled water in favor of tap whenever possible, don't reuse plastic water bottles, and never leave bottles of water in the sun as this accelerates the breakdown of microplastics.
- **Avoid Foods Packaged in Plastic.** Some of the biggest decisions you'll make to avoid microplastic exposure in the kitchen will actually take place in the grocery store. Whenever possible, opt for whole, unprocessed foods, shop from the fresh produce aisle and specialty counters like butchers or bakeries, or head to the nearest farmer's market. Be mindful of **where microplastics may be hiding** (tea, rice, and sea salt are some of the worst offenders).
- **Stop Microwaving Food in Plastic Containers.** If there's one last thing we can leave you with, it's to replace your plastic food storage containers with non-plastic materials and to avoid putting plastic containers in the microwave. Even when a product is labeled as "microwave safe," this only means that it won't melt in the heat.

"For households, think about what you store the food in, if you microwave it, and all

of your cooking utensils, because that's a direct exposure. Anything that flakes off gets into the food and goes into the mouth," Hansen says.

Knowledge is power, and by taking a few simple precautions, you *can* meaningfully limit your exposure and move the needle on your health.

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