Plastic Container Safety

Plastic, the most widely utilized material in the United States, can be found in everything from paper milk cartons to clothes. But not all plastics are created equal, particularly products made with plastic for food storage. Some types of plastic can leach chemicals into your food, especially if they are over-used or microwaved.

What to look for:
Plastics are typically classified by a number from #1 to #7, each number representing a different type of resin. This number is usually imprinted on the bottom of the container inside the middle of the recycling triangle.

#1 Polyethylene Terephthalate (PETE)
Commonly used in 2 liter soda bottles, cooking oil bottles and peanut butter jars. It is the the most common recycled plastic.

#2 High Density Polyethylene (HDPE)
Commonly used in milk jugs, toys, liquid detergent bottles and shampoo bottles.

#3 Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC)
Commonly used for meat wrap, salad dressing, liquid detergent containers, plastic pipes, outdoor furniture, shrink wrap and water bottles.

#4 Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE)
Commonly used for used for dry-cleaning bags, produce bags, trash can liners, food storage containers and sandwich bags. Stores such as Safeway, Alberton's Food and Drug, Raley's, Ralph Food Companies and G&G Supermarkets accept plastic bags for recycling.

#5 Polypropylene (PP)
Commonly used for bottle caps, drinking straws, syrup bottles, yogurt or margarine cups/tubs and baby diapers. *Recycling centers almost never take #5 plastic.

#6 Polystyrene (PS)
Commonly used for packaging pellets, disposable coffee cups, plastic tableware, meat trays and clam-shell take-out containers.

#7 Other (misc.; usually polycarbonate, or PC, but also polylactide, or PLA, plastics made from renewable resources)
Commonly used for baby bottles, some reusable water bottles, stain-resistant food-storage containers, Tupperware and medical storage containers. *Recycling centers cannot recycle plastic #7 so look for other alternatives.

Safer plastics:

#2 HDPE, #4 LDPE and #5 PP
These three types of plastic are the healthiest. They transmit no known chemicals into food and they're usually recyclable; #2 is very commonly accepted by municipal recycling programs, but you may have a more difficult time finding recycling for #4 and #5 containers.

#1 PET
#1 bottles and containers are fine for single use and are widely accepted by municipal recyclers. It is best to avoid reusing #1 plastic bottles; water and soda bottles are hard to clean, and because plastic is porous, these bottles absorb flavors and bacteria that you can't get rid of.

#7 PLA

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PLA (polylactide) plastics are made from renewable resources such as corn, potatoes and sugar cane and high-starch sources. The starch is converted into polylactide acid (PLA). Although you can't recycle these plant-based plastics, you can compost them in a municipal composter or in your backyard compost heap. Most decompose in about twelve days unlike conventional plastic, which can take up to 100 years.

Plastics to avoid:

#3 PVC (Polyvinyl Chloride)
This plastic is often used frequently in cling wraps for meat. PVC contains softeners called phthalates that interfere with hormonal development. Vinyl chloride, the primary building block of PVC, is a known human carcinogen. Manufacturing and incinerating PVC releases dioxin, a potent carcinogen and hormone disruptor.

#6 PS (Extruded Polystyrene aka Styrofoam)
This plastic is used in take-out containers and cups, and non-extruded PS is used in clear disposable takeout containers, disposable plastic cutlery and cups. Both forms of PS can leach styrene into food which is considered a possible human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. It may also disrupt hormones or affect reproduction.

#7 PC (Polycarbonate)
This plastic is found in baby bottles, water-cooler bottles and the epoxy linings of tin food cans. PC is composed of a hormone-disrupting chemical called bisphenol A, which has been linked to a wide variety of problems such as cancer and obesity.

Adapted from www.GreenGuide.com and http://www.recyclenow.org/r_plastics.html