

Around the world, masks and gloves are turning into plastic pollution

Although 8 million tons of plastic are already dumped in the oceans every year, waste linked to COVID-19 is posing an additional threat.

Eva Alessi (Head of Sustainability Program at WWF Italy)

"They are not always disposed of properly, and they are ending up in streets, parks, sidewalks and roads. This is not only a potential health risk, this is also a huge environmental issue because these masks, gloves are made with materials that are not biodegradable."

In Italy alone, if just 1% of the masks currently being used were discarded in nature, 10 million masks would end up in the ocean each month. Surgical masks are made with polypropylene, a petroleum derivative, and take up to 450 years to decompose.

Eva Alessi

"This plastic does not disappear but rather slowly breaks down into microplastics which enter the food chain with devastating effects."

In water, masks and other plastic medical equipment constitute a particularly dangerous form of pollution for wildlife.

John Hocevar, Oceans campaign director at Greenpeace USA - 04/05/2020 - CNN

"Gloves, like plastic bags, can appear to be jellyfish or other types of foods for sea turtles, for example. The straps on masks can present entangling hazards."

Several solutions could help to improve the situation: changing the manufacturing materials so they can be recycled, opting for reusable masks and gloves, raising public awareness about health care waste ...

Delphine Lévi Alvarès (European Coordinator of the Break Free From Plastic movement)

"You can protect yourself [from the virus] without producing single-use plastic waste. And there is this inspiring movement of Do It Yourself masks makers out there. They're using leftover fabric and natural fibers to produce masks that can really protect regular citizens. When it comes to gloves, if you just wash your hands following the guidelines of 20 seconds, warm water and soap, you don't need gloves at all."

For environmental NGOs, the widespread use of single-use plastic equipment is linked to the belief that plastic is less likely to carry COVID-19. However, several studies have debunked this claim, circulated by the plastic industry.

Plastic Industry Association 18/03/2020

"The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many Americans, businesses and government officials to realize that single-use plastic are often the safest choice."

Delphine Lévi Alvarès

"The industry that is making these products has been lobbying the masses to make them believe that those products will protect them the most from COVID-19. This industry is feeding off people's fears to sell their products beyond the usual health care sector. A lot is at stake and we must remain extremely vigilant. As I speak the plastic lobby is using fallacious scientific arguments to push back on some environmental legislations that we have secured. Lawmakers are under pressure, and within many states in the U.S., bans on plastic bags have been pushed back during the pandemic. But at the same time there is hope, and the European Commission, for example, seems to be remaining strong, protecting some essential environmental legislations for the citizens in the EU. This pandemic is showing us that we need to build resilience of our societies. And we need our Earth to be healthy in order to have healthy communities."

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