



For immediate release

Canadian doctors applaud plastics ban in throne speech; concerned about rapid rise in disposable plastic items due to COVID-19

Toronto, Ont. - Doctors from the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) are concerned about the long-term health and environmental consequences of the current surge in the use of disposable items, especially single use plastics, in response to COVID-19.

In a response to concern about transmission of the COVID-19 virus on surfaces, single-use plastics have become increasingly prevalent in recent months. In Canada, in addition to spikes in takeout from restaurants, grocery stores banned reusable shopping bags and refillable containers for bulk purchasing. In late March, the BC government suggested that all stores should provide plastic bags to consumers, in an abrupt change of position from its leadership moving away from single use plastics. These efforts were driven by reasonable concerns about surface transmission of COVID-19, particularly in the early weeks of the pandemic. Single-use plastic packaging was viewed as necessary to limit the spread of the virus.

In the intervening months, however, research on this topic has evolved. Recent commentary in the Lancet argues that early estimates of virus survival on surfaces were exaggerated because initial experiments used quantities of the virus magnitudes larger than what would be transmitted in a sneeze or a cough. The Government of Canada and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States identify person-to-person contact as the primary way the virus is spread, not surface transmission.

Even in the context of potential surface transmission, the benefit of disposable plastics over a reusable option is unproven. "When I work in my clinic I use disposable personal protective equipment because it protects me and my patients from COVID-19," says Dr. Melissa Lem, family physician in Vancouver and Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia. "The evidence does not support the same measures to protect consumers from their coffee and groceries."

"There is no clear benefit to using disposable plastics rather than a reusable option in our efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19," says Dr. Samantha Green, family physician in Toronto. "Disposable plastic is no less likely to be contaminated than a reusable option. Ensuring the safety of the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic does not require abandoning cloth bags, buying bottled water, or wrapping our bread and bananas in plastic."

While providing limited prevention of viral spread, single-use plastics cause substantial harm to the many interconnected systems that enable planetary health. Plastics make up more than 80 per cent of marine litter, clogging beaches and degrading into microplastics. Only 9% of plastics are recycled in Canada, with the remainder incinerated or ending up in a landfill or as litter. Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel extraction and transportation to create plastics, as well as their manufacture and ultimate disposal, threaten our ability to stabilize the climate according to a report from the Centre for International Environmental Law. Beyond climate impacts, exposure to plastics can disrupt the endocrine system, negatively impacting fertility and increasing risk of breast cancer for workers in the plastics industry.

“Along with the COVID crisis, we continue to experience the plastics crisis, climate crisis and extinction crisis,” says Dr. Joe Vipond, emergency physician in Calgary and Interim President of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. “We can't neglect the long-term just because the COVID crisis is the most immediately pressing. With no evidence of the utility of single-use plastics in mitigating Covid transmission, we must continue to push efforts to limit plastics from entering the biosphere, and impacting our health.”

In the throne speech, the Government of Canada announced a ban on harmful single-use plastics; this move is supported by a majority of Canadians. Common sense hygiene makes reusable options the safe choice they have always been. As plastic use dramatically increases, the need for regulation and clarity about when plastics are and are not necessary is greater than ever.

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