



A GLOBAL
TOBACCO
INDUSTRY
WATCHDOG

Mythbuster



Global



3 Myths About Cigarette Filters and the Plastic They Contain

May 2023

Almost all commercial cigarettes contain filters that are made out of plastic. Contrary to popular belief, cigarette filters offer no health benefits—but they do contribute to the growing and serious problem of plastic pollution.

In fact, cigarette butts are one of the most pervasive forms of single-use plastic litter and pollution on Earth, with 4.5 trillion discarded globally every year.

Many jurisdictions are legislating against single-use plastics. Yet misinformation about cigarette filters may be dissuading policymakers from including them in strong regulations to reduce single-use plastics. Here are three common myths about cigarette filters and the truths behind them.

Myth 1: Filters make cigarettes safer.

Fact: Filters have no proven health benefits and may actually make smoking more dangerous.

- Modern plastic cigarette filters were introduced in the 1950s in response to smokers' growing concerns about lung cancer.¹
- Independent research has shown that cigarette filters do not make cigarettes less harmful for smokers or those exposed to second-hand smoke.²
- Research suggests that filters may even increase harm to smokers. Filters allow smokers to inhale smoke—and plastic fibers—more deeply into their lungs.³
- The word “filter,” along with the tobacco industry's implied marketing claims that filters make cigarettes safer, has misled generations of people who otherwise may have quit.⁴ Filters can also encourage smoking, by making smoking feel less harsh to young people and people just starting to smoke.⁵

**Myth 2:
Cigarette butts are biodegradable.**

**Fact:
The filters in cigarette butts do not biodegrade. Instead, they break down into toxic microplastics.**

- It can take anywhere from one to ten years for a cigarette butt to break down.^{6, 7}
- The filters do not dissolve or disappear, but break down into smaller plastic particles (microplastics) that then enter the environment, threatening the health of animals and humans.^{8, 9} Microplastics have been found in water, in the air and even in human blood and organs.¹⁰
- Cigarette butts leach nicotine, toxic chemicals and heavy metals into soil and water, harming plants and aquatic life.¹¹

**Myth 3:
Cigarette butts can be recycled.**

**Fact:
No practical, safe system exists to recycle cigarette butts.**

- Some cigarette companies sponsor anti-littering programs¹² or cigarette waste recycling efforts,¹³ but these are small-scale efforts that mainly serve to boost the companies' reputation. These recycling systems could never keep up with the trillions of cigarette butts thrown out every year.
- The Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup initiative claims to have collected more than 60 million cigarette butts over 32 years of clean-ups.¹⁴ This amount, collected over more than three decades, represents just .00001% of the 5 trillion cigarettes produced every year.
- There is no environmentally or financially sustainable way to deal with cigarette butt litter. Cigarette waste contains hazardous components, including arsenic and heavy metals, that make any means of disposal harmful to the environment.^{15, 16}

The tobacco industry is not an environmental ally.

The growing, manufacturing, consumption and disposal of tobacco products all harm the environment.

Tobacco companies perform environmentally-focused corporate social responsibility activities, such as cigarette butt clean-ups and tree planting events, to improve their reputation and create the appearance of being environmentally responsible. In reality, these initiatives don't come close to mitigating the environmental harm caused by their products, such as massive deforestation, soil degradation, water contamination and CO2 emissions.

These initiatives can lead to interactions between tobacco companies and local and national governments. These relationships can later be used by the tobacco industry to weaken health policy. Given its history, the industry must be kept out of all health and environmental policy discussions in order for effective regulations to be developed and implemented.

Recommendations

- Cigarette filters are toxic, single-use plastics that bring no benefit to society. They should remain categorized as such in the [UN Plastics Pollution Treaty](#). Cigarette filters are an example of a plastic that should be banned outright.
- Governments should use all available policy tools to reduce tobacco consumption, including implementing smoke-free places, comprehensive advertising bans that include corporate social responsibility activities and increased tobacco taxes.
- Governments must keep the tobacco industry out of all policy discussions around health and the environment.

3 Myths About Cigarette Filters and the Plastic They Contain

Endnotes

1. <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/31/e1/e80>
2. <https://tobaccotactics.org/article/cigarette-filters/>
3. <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/31/e1/e80>
4. https://exposetobacco.org/wp-content/uploads/STOP_Report_Addiction-At-Any-Cost.pdf
5. <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/harmful-effects-tobacco/cigarette-filters-mislead-consumers-1-3-smokers-falsely>
6. <http://ash.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASH-Tobacco-Environment-Report-2022.pdf>
7. <https://ggtc.world/knowledge/sustainability-and-human-rights/tobaccos-toxic-plastics-a-global-outlook>
8. <http://ash.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASH-Tobacco-Environment-Report-2022.pdf>
9. <https://ggtc.world/knowledge/sustainability-and-human-rights/tobaccos-toxic-plastics-a-global-outlook>
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/24/microplastics-found-in-human-blood-for-first-time>
11. <https://theconversation.com/cigarette-butts-are-the-forgotten-plastic-pollution-and-they-could-be-killing-our-plants-119958>
12. <https://tobaccotactics.org/article/greenwashing/>
13. <https://www.terracycle.com/en-US/brigades/cigarette-waste-recycling>
14. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/plastic-straw-ban-cigarette-butts-are-single-greatest-source-ocean-n903661>
15. https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/20/Suppl_1/i25#xref-ref-6-1
16. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/6/5/1691>



A GLOBAL
TOBACCO
INDUSTRY
WATCHDOG

About STOP (Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products)

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry tactics that undermine public health. Comprised of a network of academic and public health organizations, STOP researches and monitors the tobacco industry, shares intelligence to counter its tactics, and exposes its misdeeds to a global audience. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies as part of the [Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use](#). For more information, visit exposetobacco.org.