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# Promoting healthy eating without plastics: An ethical practice in primary care

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## **Promoting healthy eating without plastics: An ethical practice in primary care**

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## ABSTRACT

Effective clinical interventions to engage in new habits remain a challenge despite intense research. One such strategy is to include the environmental issue of plastic packaging from ultra-processed food in nutrition recommendations. It expands the notion of health, contributing to engaging in healthy eating behaviors, in addition to being an ethical practice for health professionals. It brings co-benefits for both the environment and individual health through motivational incentives of less individual pollution, contributing to healthier food systems. Primary health professionals should be prepared to deal with risks of plastics and waste reduction strategies in their practice.

**Keywords:** plastic, eating, primary care, public health, waste

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

Healthy lifestyle promotion is a cornerstone of disease prevention. However, effective clinical interventions to engage in new habits remain a challenge despite intense research. One such strategy is to include the environmental issue of plastic packaging in nutrition recommendations. It expands the notion of health, contributing to engaging in healthy eating behaviors, in addition to being an ethical practice for health professionals. Suggesting the avoidance of food with plastic packaging can be understood as part of a no-harm ethical practice, besides being a quick tip to avoid ultra-processed food. It brings co-benefits for both the environment and individual health through motivational incentives of less individual pollution, contributing to healthier food systems.

The food and beverage sector is one of the major sources of single-use plastic packaging (Phelan et al., 2022; Trasand, 2022), which seems to be closely related to ultra-processed foods and subsequent waste generation and pollution. This type of food usually has five or more ingredients, among them many additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking. In addition to being a threat to traditional food cultures and the food sovereignty of populations, high consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with an increase in non-communicable diseases, overweight and obesity (Pagliai et al., 2021). Single-use packaging is among the most commonly encountered polymers found in the human body, in organs like lungs (Amato-Lourenço et al., 2021) and placenta (Ragusa et al., 2021). Furthermore, new evidence reveals microplastics in our hearts (Yang et al., 2023), in carotid plaques (Marfella et al., 2024) and plastic additives are known as a source of endocrine-disrupting chemicals, contributing to infertility and non-communicable diseases including obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers (Trasande, 2022). The same kind of plastic is one of the major constituents of the million tonnes of plastic that end up on the waterways yearly.

Plastics are now ubiquitous pollutants in the biosphere, becoming one of the hallmarks of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al., 2016). They are petroleum derivatives, hence also linked to climate change. Those plastics are killing animals, rivers, sea, and creating islands of plastic in the middle of the oceans (Booth et al., 2023). Waste management and recycling are not increasing at the same rate as plastic pollution. Although there is waste management and recycling in some regions, these measures are insufficient as they do not increase at the same rate as the production of plastic waste. Furthermore, we must remember that being recyclable does not mean that it is recycled. According to the OECD, only 9% of plastic waste is recycled globally. There is also recent concern about the increase in the toxicity of plastics after recycling. Considering this scenario, reducing consumption may be one among a range of more effective measures.

Considering planetary health perspective, it seems very clear that there is a close relationship between our consumption of ultra-processed foods, environmental impact and human health. Therefore, health professionals should be prepared to deal with risks of plastics and waste reduction strategies in their practice (Deeney et al., 2022). Perhaps we can take a minute for the planet to explain the co-benefits of a diet with less ultra-processed food wrapped up in plastics such as better general health, better environment and less plastic pollution. A good example to use in consultation is how the use of PET bottles of fizzy drinks is related to high sugar consumption and risks for the seas and environment.

Primary health care has the potential to address the issue of plastics, as it is inextricably linked to environmental health and is already at the forefront of Climate and Planetary health

actions (Xie et al., 2018). This level of care is ideal to implement a person-centered approach, which is essential to not distress or overload the patient with excessive responsibilities that can lead to guilt, anxiety and depression. Surely “Big Food” corporations and governments must bear the greatest burden to change their packaging and food production chains and any information on plastics aim for nudging (He et al., 2023) and not pushing. Nonetheless, many patients are already interested in how food systems harm the environment, and many more may enjoy learning about potential co-benefits of avoiding it. In this sense, people may be more motivated by environmental imperatives to change behaviour (Bissing-Olson et al., 2016). It is potential to include this message in primary care consultations for improving sustainable eating for health and a win-win approach to reduce plastic waste.

Addressing plastic use in connection with food choices can contribute to the adoption of sustainable eating habits recommended by many dietary guidelines around the world, specially Brazil, Uruguay and Israel that encourage limiting ultra-processed food. In addition, this engagement is crucial for communities and patients to create and reinforce their social participation in decision-making bodies on public policies that can guarantee access to fresh and local foods, as well as regulatory measures for ultra-processed foods.

Ultimately, this strategy of informing about plastics of food is aligned with Planetary Health Care, which can be considered as an attribute (Barros et al., 2021) of primary care and an advocacy tool for prevention and health promotion. It is part of the ethical struggle to the human right to a healthy environment. Whenever possible, providers may support their patients towards person-planet co-benefits. A patient-doctor conversation about plastics may be a good start. It is worth a try. After all, who wants to eat plastics? Should we take one minute for the planet in the consultation? This new strategy deserves research and development in order to enter best practice.

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### **Authors Declaration (Contribuição de autoria)**

Mayara Floss.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing Original Draft preparation, Visualization Ylana Elias Rodrigues.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing Original Draft preparation. Carolina Gomes Teixeira Cabral.: Writing Original Draft preparation. Enrique Falceto de Barros.: Conceptualization, Review & Editing, Resources. Thais Mauad.: Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Resources. Paulo Hilário Saldiva Nascimento.: Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Resources.

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