

A simple thing to protect rivers and lakes



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People often wonder what they can personally do to protect rivers and lakes. Here is one simple thing that will make a huge difference:

Gather your facial scrubs, body wash, and toothpaste. Look for tiny round beads inside these products. Look for the word 'microbead' on the label. Some products highlight them as a selling feature. Check the ingredients. Look for polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP), polyethylene terephthalate (PET), polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA) or nylon.

I recently discovered that my favourite scrub contained microbeads — and lots of them! Since one tube of facial scrub may contain over 300,000 microbeads, I realized that I have washed over a million microbeads down my sink over the years — without even knowing. I stopped buying this product.

Here is why:

Microbeads are tiny bits of plastic (usually less than 1 mm) found in many personal care products. In facial scrubs and body wash,

they are the grit that exfoliates skin. They are designed to be washed down the sink. Even if wastewater goes to a treatment plant, microbeads are too small to be filtered, too light to settle, and plastic is not broken down by microbes.

Microbeads end up in rivers, lakes, and oceans where they attract toxins including pesticides, PCBs, and petrochemicals. They can be a million times more toxic than the surrounding water. They get coated with algae and sink to the bottom. Resembling eggs, they are eaten by fish. The toxins enter the flesh and move up the food chain to fish-eaters — including people.

Some manufacturers have been slow to find alternatives. This summer, Canada took a first step toward banning microbeads — by moving to classify them as a toxic substance. But it may take years before these products are removed from store shelves.

What can we do until then?

Only buy scrubs with natural abrasives such as walnut shells, bamboo powder, carrot powder, poppy seeds, sand, apricot shells, jojoba beans or pumice. I found eight products with plastic microbeads in one store recently — and no biodegradable alternatives. Don't give up. Try another store or buy a grit-free face wash and a loofah sponge for scrubbing.

What about the unfinished tubes with



Supplied photo

Try using alternatives to products containing plastic microbeads.

microbeads?

Return them to the store or manufacturer. Use them to educate others. It is not ideal to throw them away, but it is still better to send microbeads to the landfill than down the sink to the river.

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