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## Littering

Litter, from the Latin *lectus* 'bed,' is a very versatile word with many meanings. There is cat litter, leaf litter, litters on which sick and wounded people are carried, and litters of kittens. The pages of this book are littered with facts, animals bed down on litter (straw), and long ago, important people were carried in litters on the shoulders of men. But, of course, we're not talking about any of these.

For our purposes, *littering* is the act of throwing, dropping, or leaving paper, cans, and bottles—otherwise known as trash—in open or public places. No matter how careful you are or how hard you try not to, we all produce trash every day. Some is recycled, some is burned, some is buried in landfills, and the rest turns into litter.

According to statistics, fast food trash makes up 33% of litter. Close behind is paper at 29%, aluminum cans at 28%, glass bottles at 6%, and plastic at 2%. So, how long does it take for litter to disappear, or decompose, on its own? Consider these facts the next time you throw a trash-filled Mickey D bag out of the car window.

Object	Time to Decompose
Styrofoam container	More than 1 million years
Plastic jug	1 million years
Aluminum can	200-500 years
Disposable diaper	550 years
Tin can	90 years
Paper bag	1 month
Banana peel	3-4 weeks

People litter for different reasons. Sometimes it's by accident, like when a wrapper falls out of your pocket before you have the chance to throw it away. Other times it's because people are too lazy to take their trash to a container. Either way, here are some good reasons to make the effort and not litter.

1. Litter is ugly. We asked around and couldn't find anyone that likes litter.
2. Litter hurts animals. Did you know that small animals crawl into bottles or jars, get stuck, and starve to death? And that fish and birds get tangled up in plastic six-pack rings, plastic bags, and fishing line and die from infections or are strangled?
3. Litter spreads disease. Did you know that paper cups and beverage cans collect rainwater and can be breeding grounds for mosquitoes that cause West Nile virus and malaria?
4. Litter is expensive. Did you know that the Virginia Department of Transportation spends about \$7 million cleaning up litter every year? Think about how much it costs all over the world!



#### Littering Dos and Don'ts

- Don't litter. Put trash where it belongs.
- Speak up if you see a friend litter.
- If you see litter, pick it up and throw it away.

CONSIDER THIS: The best thing about litter is that you can stop it.

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