

# Reusable vs. Disposable



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## A primer for householders

There are a few places where being virtuous is **more** than its own reward. Riding your bike instead of using the car, for example, nets you financial savings and health benefits in addition to the virtue points. Few things have a better pay off than choosing reusable solutions for household tasks. Reusable solutions not only save money, the environment and time, but often do a better job than the disposable alternative; your peanut butter sandwich, for example, will fare much better in a reusable container than in a plastic bag.

Take, for example, using paper towels to dry your hands at home. Assuming you have a family of four washing their hands three times a day and using just one paper towel to dry, you'd use 4,380 paper towels a year. That's 20 rolls of paper towels per year, at a cost of

\$42.55 a year and 29 pounds of non-recyclable paper. Seven hand towels, one for each day of the week and factoring in the expense of washing them, would cost only \$21.92 brand new.

To prove that you can save money, and since I'm just a bit obsessive, I've made a handy chart of disposable/reusable options, and the cost associated with each. The savings for some options are pretty substantial, and improve year by year since most reusable options will last several years before they need to be replaced.

Because the environmental impact of disposable products is a big issue, I weighed most of the disposable products and figured out how much would go into the waste stream. The total was a whopping 84 pounds of discarded stuff, most of it non-recyclable. Avoiding that much trash is a plus in itself, but buying reusable items also helps to cut down on manufacturing waste, since you're buying one item and using it for years.

As for time, there are a couple of ways to look at it. Grocery shopping takes time, particularly if you comparison shop. Every item you remove from your grocery list is a little less time you have to spend figuring out unit pricing. If you're of the "time is money" school, a handy way to consider the value of a particular choice is to calculate your savings as an hourly wage. If it takes you 2 minutes per school day to fill and later wash juice containers, you divide the total amount of money saved (\$112.28) by the number of minutes used (2 minutes x 260 days = 520) x 60 = \$12.95 per hour for filling juice boxes.

Not all the options will work for every family, of course, but it's worth quietly considering each one to determine whether the disposable option is really worth it to you. If a disposable product is costing you more than you care to pay, why not make a different choice?

## Choices for a family of four for one year

*(Where it applies, I've included a figure for the washing cost. Your numbers for any given option may be different, since there's a whole range of brands and prices for both types of products.)*

Disposable choice	Disposable Cost	Reusable choice	Reusable Cost
Paper coffee filters, one pot of coffee per day	\$10.03	Coffee sock	\$4.25 x 2 = \$8.50
Ziplock Sandwich bags, 2 people taking lunch each day*	\$24.44 per year	Sandwich container	\$1.92 x 2 = \$3.84
Sponges for dishes & cleaning	\$9.90 (two per month)	Dish cloths	\$17.72 (plus 5¢ per week to wash=\$2.60/year)
Brand Name dry Laundry Detergent	29¢ per load/100 loads per year = \$29.00	Concentrated liquid detergent	10¢ per load/100 loads per year = \$10.00
Paper towels in the bathroom	\$42.55	Hand towels, one for every day of the week	\$19.32 (plus 5¢ per week to wash=\$2.60/year)
Paper napkins/ 2 meals a day	\$35.91	Cloth napkins, 7 for each person**	\$65.52 (plus 5¢ per week to wash=\$2.60/year)
Aseptic Juice paks, 1 per child per lunch	7¢ per ounce/ \$228.28 per year	The same juice made from concentrate, in a reusable juice cup	\$119 for concentrate, \$8 for juice cups = \$127.00
Lipton Tea bags	\$4.99/8 oz, \$19.96/year	Bulk Pekoe Supreme	\$8.11/lb, \$16.22/year plus \$3.05 for a tea ball = \$19.27
Paper bags for groceries, 4 bags per week	\$10.40 per year (based on the 5¢ bag refund)	2 cloth bags	\$8.00
Cost this year	\$410.47		\$286.97
Cost next year	\$410.47		\$143.02

\*Ziplocks can be washed and reused. If you get 6 uses out of each one, you'll only use 2 boxes per year, for a total cost of \$3.86 per year, every year.

\*\* Cloth napkins vary widely in price, from 50¢ each at the thrift store to \$6 or more at boutiques. I used the Co-op price of \$2.34 each.

## Recycling 202

### The “Other R’s” – Refuse, Redefine, Retool, Repair, Reclaim.

**Refuse** to buy things you don’t really want or need; refuse to buy things that you *do* want or need if they don’t meet your standards. Refusing can be tough; it’s not easy to pass over the mop with the one-use disposable head (and we all hate washing out the dirty mop) but we all need do just that. If you really need a mop at all, then get a sturdy one with a head that gets replaced when it’s worn.

**Redefine** your standards. For almost everything you buy you have a choice between something that will last forever and something that will self-destruct. This sometimes means spending a bit more, but that’s not always true. Cast iron skillets cost far less than good quality non-stick, for instance.

**Retool** items that no longer have a use. Looking at my, the cloth napkins live in a huge pottery bowl with a crack in it, the baking soda (for cleaning the sink) is in a salt shaker that was far too big for salt, and the dish soap is in a pump bottle that once held lotion.

**Restore** should probably really read “preserve”, but that doesn’t start with an “R”. If you buy only good things, it’s worth taking care of them, especially since it takes less time and expense to maintain things than to replace them. I still use my Mom’s 1961 sewing machine. Twice a year I clean it and oil it a bit. Meanwhile, my friends all have fancy electronic sewing machines, which they hardly ever use because they’re forever breaking down.

**Reclaim** is an iffy one for some people, who dislike “used” items. You can eventually find almost anything you want in perfect condition at a thrift store or yard sale. (If you’re one of the people who can’t stand to buy used stuff, at least donate your own used stuff to the thrift store.) As you might guess, I own a lot of specialized kitchen equipment. Hardly any of it was bought new, because they don’t make what I want any more. I’d rather spend money at the antique store or thrift store and get really sturdy kitchen items that will last.