



Personal Sustainability Guide

Each of us shares a personal responsibility to conserve and protect Earth's precious resources for all life that calls this planet home. Future generations depend on us—here and now—to live sustainably within our means so that life may flourish. Our individual choices and consumption habits can have far reaching consequences, and we should all be conscious of these effects and work toward living more sustainable lives.

Living sustainably means living a lifestyle with as little impact on the environment as possible. Many of us have the wealth and privilege to make changes that reduce our impact on the environment. Simple changes to our habits can be a great way to cultivate a healthy planet, reduce our personal impact on climate change, and influence or inspire the actions of others in our communities.

This comprehensive guide provides some of the fundamental information needed to make sustainable choices in our daily lives. Making every change in this guide may be a challenging task, so we recommend starting small and identifying the easiest changes that fit your lifestyle and building from there. If we each follow a fraction of the advice in this guide that works for us, we will be well on our way to a green, sustainable society. But remember, you can always do more!

In this guide, we'll focus on two modes of sustainability:

1. Ways to reduce your carbon footprint
2. Ways to reduce your resource consumption

Carbon Footprint Reduction:

A carbon footprint is a measure of the amount of CO₂ produced by an individual, it gives an indication of the impact the person is having on climate change. There's a "carbon cost" to almost everything that we do, the challenge is to figure out which activities can be reduced or removed from our lives! Often, a high carbon footprint will go hand in hand with high resource consumption—reducing one can help you reduce the other.

The average American household has a carbon footprint of [48 metric tonnes of CO₂ per year](#), which takes more than 55 acres of U.S. forests to absorb in one year! You can calculate your carbon footprint using [this calculator](#) to get an idea of how much CO₂ you currently produce.

Carbon Offsets

Carbon offsets are a way of further reducing your carbon footprint by buying into projects that drawdown CO₂ from the atmosphere. These projects can range from organizations that are planting trees to sequester carbon, replacing cookstoves in developing countries to make them fuel efficient and less polluting, creating renewable energy infrastructure in developing



countries, etc. Your money goes directly to the project, so essentially you are purchasing the amount of CO₂ you're using by buying into CO₂-removing projects.

If you have the ability to purchase them, carbon offsets are a great preliminary way to reduce your footprint or complete that final push to bring your footprint to net-zero emissions!

Transportation

Cars

One of the biggest emitters of CO₂ for Americans is transportation. The average car produces [4.6 metric tonnes of CO₂ per year](#), alongside [other pollutants](#) like carbon monoxide, ozone, and particulates that create smog and contribute to climate change. Reducing car trips through car-pooling, public transportation, biking, or better trip planning can be a simple way to cut your emissions from transportation. Purchasing a hybrid car or an electric vehicle can be an attractive solution to reducing or eliminating your gasoline consumption, but [do your research](#) before you purchase! Often, electric vehicles are charged with electricity from a grid that is powered by fossil fuels. The carbon costs of electric vehicle battery production and maintenance can vary based on your location and should definitely be taken into consideration.

Planes

Plane flights are a particularly carbon-intensive method of travel. One economy round-trip flight across the country (from Los Angeles to New York City) costs about [.57 metric tonnes of CO₂](#). A transatlantic flight can cost [three times as much CO₂](#). Not to mention, planes are releasing pollutants as they fly that also contribute to climate change and pollution. Reducing plane trips can have a high impact on your carbon footprint!

Food

Food accounts for [10-30%](#) of a U.S. household's carbon footprint, and it is also often produced in resource-intensive ways that can be a drain on soil health and water supply, particularly in dry areas of the country. Not to mention, food production can be embroiled in human rights violations in the U.S. and globally through unjust labor practices, forced relocation, pollution of drinking water, etc. It can be difficult to make huge shifts to your diet, but making simple choices a day at a time will really impact your carbon footprint and resource consumption. Here is a guide to popular but environmentally costly foods!

**Beef***

6.6 lbs CO₂ per serving
1,875 gallons water per lb

Cheese

2.45 lbs CO₂ per serving
600 gallons water per lb

Almonds

2,126 gallons water per lb

Palm Oil**

Palm oil production causes
mass deforestation & labor
exploitation

Butter

13 lbs CO₂ per lb

Shellfish*

12.5 lbs CO₂ per lb
Shellfish populations also
threatened by overfishing.

Coffee

55 gallons water per cup
Coffee is linked to labor
exploitation and
deforestation.

Pork*

9 lbs CO₂ per serving
728 gallons water per lb

Chocolate

3,170 gallons water per lb
Chocolate is linked to labor
exploitation and
deforestation.

**Switching to a plant-based diet is one of the best things to do for your personal carbon footprint. At the very least, switching to one vegetarian meal a week can save the equivalent of 1,160 miles of driving in the average car.*

***Palm oil is widely used in processed foods and beauty products. It causes mass deforestation, which releases CO₂ stored in carbon-rich rainforests and contributes to climate change, forced relocation of Indigenous peoples, and soil/ecosystem degradation. Check labels at the store!*

Food is a great place to start changing your consumption patterns because your commitment level can start low and build up as you become more comfortable with diet changes. Any change you make will have big pay-outs for the lives of people working in the agricultural industry globally and also for the environment.

Another thing to consider is the seasonality of your food and the costs of its transportation. “Big Ag,” or the agricultural industry, has expanded the aisles of our produce sections to give us year-round access to all of our favorite products—but at what cost? Choosing to buy foods in season and switching to local food sources that support small farmers will reduce the distance your food has to be transported to your grocery aisle, reducing your carbon footprint and providing you with ethically grown food.

Co-operative food stores (co-ops) are common in metropolitan areas. Co-ops allow members and employees to have more agency over the food distribution process. They usually carry local and organic produce and support small business owners. You should also consider going to your local farmers’ or searching for a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) near you. For a one-time fee, CSAs allow you to receive weekly boxes of fresh produce from a small, local farmer during the harvest season.



Consumption choices

Making more environmentally-friendly consumption choices may seem like you have to purchase more expensive “eco-products” in the stores like the compostable napkins, wooden toothbrushes, or organic deodorant. However, there are a lot of ways to both align environmentalism and money-saving by choosing low-cost products focused on reusability, buying recycled or used products, and by refusing consumption altogether.

Overall, a good guideline is to keep your waste production as low as possible through minimalist living. Waste production, whether it be food or other products, leads to an increased amount of garbage in landfills, which actually [produce powerful greenhouse gases like methane](#) as things decompose and degrade.

You may have heard of the 3 R’s (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle), but we’ll also be talking about the little-known fourth R: Refuse! Employing these 4 R’s can span a wide range of individual actions. The actions below are by no means the end, rather they are just the beginning of consumptive choices you can make to reduce your environmental impact!

Why Reduce?

Increased production always equals increased greenhouse gas emissions, no matter the product. So, reducing consumption benefits the environment in two ways: by reducing the plastic packaging you are consuming and by reducing production costs to the environment.

Ways to reduce:

- Print papers double-sided
- Wrap gifts during the holiday season in newspaper rather than buying and tossing wrapping paper
- Cancel unnecessary mail or switch to electronic services to reduce the amount of paper sent to your home
- Opt for electronic gift cards and receipts rather than paper or plastic
- Buy foods in bulk using reusable containers to reduce plastic packaging
- Learn to repair things like clothing, furniture, etc. instead of discarding it when it breaks
- Use up items you already have before buying new ones—wait until toothpaste, lotion, food, etc. actually runs out before you go to the store to get more

Why Reuse?

Generally, reusable products eliminate your usage of single-use products that can be costly to the environment in their production and degradation in landfills. Reusing can also save resources in other ways by reducing your consumption of resources like water and electricity directly in your home, which will benefit you by driving down your utility bills. There are hundreds of ways to reuse in your home, so get creative!



Ways to Reuse:

- Purchase clothing and other household items from thrift stores, clothing swaps, craigslist, or Facebook marketplace. There are still very high-quality used products out there, and it'll save a lot of money, too!
- Take reusable bags to the grocery store
- Reuse plastic bags as garbage can liners
- Buy reusable containers to store food instead of Ziploc bags
- Use dish towels or reusable cloth napkins instead of disposable paper towels
- Buy a reusable water bottle rather than disposable water bottles
- Use a reusable coffee mug, thermos, bottle, or even straws. Take your reusable containers to cafes and restaurants
- Reuse towels or wear clothes more than once before washing to reduce water consumption
- Use reusable beeswax wrap rather than plastic wrap
- For those who menstruate, consider using menstruation cups or other reusable products to cut down on waste

Why Recycle?

If you are consuming plastic, metals, etc. they will be much more valuable if recycled rather than thrown in a landfill to degrade. Recycling can reduce the decomposition of electronics and plastics in landfills, which is beneficial because these products leach deadly chemicals into the soil and water systems that harm wildlife.

Ways to Recycle:

- Recycle old electronics like laptops and phones. [Click here](#) for a comprehensive guide to recycling electronics.
- Buy rechargeable batteries
- Rinse out and recycle your plastic or glass bottles
- Break down cardboard boxes and recycle them
- Recycle used motor oil to avoid freshwater supply contamination and save oil production
- Send old clothes to donation centers, thrift stores, or clothing swaps

Why Refuse?

Refusing to consume can be one of the most powerful benefits to your carbon footprint, particularly when you consider the environmental costs of producing, processing, and shipping some of the global products we buy in the age of online shopping. Sacrificing some online shopping sprees can drive your carbon costs dramatically downward.

Ways to Refuse:

- For holidays and birthdays, opt for fewer material gifts for your family members in favor of more experience opportunities (yoga classes, vacations, concert tickets, charity donations)



- Minimize your wardrobe by only purchasing long-lasting items that work with multiple outfits
- When buying any item, ask yourself how long you will use it and how it will affect your life. Do you really need another t-shirt? Does your child really need another plastic toy?
- You can reduce unnecessary purchases by simply delaying the purchase until later. If you can survive another week without the item, then maybe you don't need it at all.

Household Energy & Resource Saving Techniques

Electricity Saving

Everyday Fixes:

- Swap incandescent bulbs for LED bulbs in light fixtures
- Avoid “vampire” power usage by unplugging devices, switching off power strips, and turning off desktop computers when you aren't using them
- Wash your laundry with cold water
- Take shorter showers and/or reduce the temperature of your showers
- Turn down the thermostat by 1 or 2 degrees
- Open curtains in the morning to let daylight in and heat your house, close them at night to keep heat in

Higher-Level Fixes:

- Update appliances that are outdated, like washing machines, refrigerators, and water heaters, to improve their energy efficiency. Your energy company may even offer discounts and rebates for switching to energy-efficient appliances!
- Blow new insulation into your attic, it'll prevent energy losses within your home much better than buying new windows because more energy is lost upward through the roof
- Install a smart meter. Smart meters can be programmed to only turn on heat or AC in certain parts of the day, which maximizes efficiency and minimizes your carbon footprint
- Install solar panels. [This calculator](#) from Google actually uses data from Google Maps to assess your home's solar potential, as well as how much money you could save on solar.
- Use a clothesline to dry clothes rather than a dryer
- Seal cracks in your vents, wrap pipe insulation around your pipes to prevent energy loss

Water Saving

Everyday Fixes:

- Use a dishwasher, if you own one
- If washing dishes by hand, fill up the sink or large pot and use that water for the dishes rather than leaving the faucet on for all of them
- Turn off the faucet while brushing your teeth
- Reduce shower length
- Run fewer loads of laundry by re-wearing clothes and re-using towels
- Water your lawn in the early morning to reduce evaporative losses



Higher Level Fixes:

- Install low-flow showerheads and faucets
- Install low-flush toilets
- If you have a garden, install a rain barrel to capture roof and gutter runoff to use in your garden
- Utilize greywater to flush your toilets. This can work in multiple ways. An example of a simple system would be to put a 5-gallon bucket in your shower for while you're waiting for it to warm up. Use this captured water to flush your toilets by pouring it straight into the bowl when you want to flush it, the weight of the water will flush the toilet with about 1.5-2 gallons. [More complex systems](#) that are professionally installed can actually divert water from laundry machines and other appliances for use in gardens or lawns
- Replace the traditional grass lawn with plants more appropriate to the climate. For desert climates, look into [xeriscaping](#). For others, check what plants are native to your region and consider plants with long root systems to encourage infiltration and storage of water into the soil

Reducing Food Waste:

Everyday Fixes:

- Shop more frequently and create a grocery list before you go to avoid random purchases that rot in the fridge
- Treat expiration dates as guidelines rather than deadlines, check if the food is actually spoiled before tossing
- Cook and serve smaller portions to reduce the amount left uneaten and tossed after a meal
- Utilize leftovers!

Higher-Level Fixes:

- Grow your own herbs, fruits, or vegetables by instituting a yard garden or pots around the house. This will reduce food waste and food costs by eliminating purchases from the grocery store
- Institute [personal composting](#). It's possible your city has municipal composting services, about 100 cities in the U.S. do. Often these services aren't available, or [are underdeveloped](#) and not actually that great for the environment. There are even some local organizations that have instituted [compost pick-up services](#) in areas that are lacking municipal services. If you choose to make your own compost, you can fertilize your plants and reduce food that travels to landfills.



Now Make A Pledge!

How are you planning to live more sustainably? Let us know! We may share your pledge in a story or on social media alongside other humanists who are HERE for Climate. We won't share identifying information.

[Sign our pledge HERE](#)

Pledge Examples:

- I'm commuting to work on my bike from now on!
- We just signed up for a composting service at our home!
- I'm going to refuse plastic bags at the grocery store!
- My family is installing solar panels for our home!
- I will be eating vegetarian meals two days a week!
- I'm switching to paperless billing on all my accounts!

Use the power of social media and personal conversation to share your progress and get others involved!

Share Your Story

One of the most important things you can do to fight climate change is also one of the simplest: talk about it! [Research shows](#) that discussing the climate crisis with family and friends reinforces that the problem is real and the science unequivocal. Yet, [nearly two-thirds](#) of Americans say they rarely or never have those conversations.

Sample Social Media Posts:

- “I just pledged to start living more sustainably by [[Specific action](#) - *Example: riding my bike to work*] using the #HEREforClimate Personal Sustainability Guide. Check it out and learn how you can make more sustainable choices, conserve resources, and save money! <https://hereforclimate.org/take-action/live-more-sustainably/>”
- “We all have a personal responsibility to combat the global climate crisis and live more sustainably. Learn how you can with the #HEREforClimate Personal Sustainability Guide”
- “The #HEREforClimate Personal Sustainability Guide made it easy to start making more sustainable choices in my daily life. I just pledged to [[Specific action](#) - *Example: eat vegetarian one day a week!*] Find out what changes you can make here! <https://hereforclimate.org/take-action/live-more-sustainably/>”