



**FAQ on
COVID-19
and zero
waste**

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At Zero Waste Europe we fully acknowledge the severity of COVID-19 and we want to be clear that individuals' health and safety during this challenging time is of utmost importance. We stand in solidarity with all the communities affected by the COVID-19 health crisis and we also understand that companies are trying to keep workers and consumers safe, and that should be the ultimate priority.

During the past two months we have been trying to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on zero waste and what we can do to keep working toward a zero waste future.

This FAQ list is a running post, expect it to change and grow, so come back to check it out again! If you want to ask a specific question or leave a comment, please [contact us](#) directly.

What's the impact of COVID-19 on reusables?

Some retailers are preventing customers from using their reusable containers and some US cities and states are suspending bans on single use plastic bags.

Today, businesses are rightly focused on how to keep us all safe. Nevertheless plastic pollution continues to be a huge environmental issue and we should keep working together with businesses to address it.

Although Bring Your Own (BYO) container programs should still be encouraged, focus has to be put into establishing more effective schemes like **third-party operated reuse, certified for health and safety**, following a full circular economy mechanism that would comply with all hygiene and safety measures.

Moreover single use plastic and other kinds packaging can carry the virus, any touching of packaging has the ability to pass the virus onto other surfaces. That's why **reusables are as safe as single use items**.

Do you want to know more on reusables?

- Watch our webinar on [COVID-19 and zero waste](#)
- Read how the EU dismissed [industry calls to lift ban on single-use plastics](#)
- Read our [9 tips for a zero waste lockdown](#)
- Watch [The New Battle in Single-Use Plastics](#)
- Read the UPSTREAM blogs [Plastic pollution, reuse, and COVID-19](#), [Reuse, resilience, and COVID-19](#) and [Sustaining positivity in a pandemic](#)

Find out more about our work on [Consumption & Production](#) & [Plastic Pollution](#)

Has COVID-19 influenced separate collection and recycling?

Some municipalities have suspended separate collection and some recycling centres have been closed. This is due to both a reduced capacity, and the fear that workers may be putting their health at risk because they can potentially be exposed to the virus if it remains on the surface of waste bags and materials when they are collected. There is also a subsequent supply problem: if separate collection stops there won't be enough recycled materials.

The European Commission [guidance on Waste Management in the context of COVID-19](#) clearly says that “there is currently no evidence that waste plays a role in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 or other respiratory viruses. Standard waste management procedures are safe or sufficient in terms of the risk for COVID-19 infection”.

The Commission specifically advises Member States to safeguard the overall continuity of proper municipal waste management services, including separate collection and recycling, and that in the context of the coronavirus crisis, it is even more important that citizens separate their waste well and ensure the flow of clean streams of recyclables towards waste treatment facilities.

Since there is no scientific, health or social reason to stop separate collection, as long as the appropriate safety measures are respected, we hope that waste management companies provide their staff with all the required personal protection devices, and that full services will resume soon.

The European recycling industry, especially the plastic one, is facing financial difficulties due to separate collection being slowed down. With sorting and recycling plants slowly reopening, we hope that separate collection levels will be back to normal soon.

Do you want to know more on separate collection and recycling?

- Read our [Statement on COVID-19 & waste management](#)
- Read [The EC Guidelines on Waste management in the context of the coronavirus crisis](#)
- [Check](#) what it is happening in different countries

Find out more about our work on [Waste Policy](#) and [Zero Waste Cities](#)

Is incineration necessary to treat waste during the pandemic?

Incineration is being portrayed as the safe treatment to deal with medical waste and ,in general, with other waste streams.

While incineration fulfils the task of destroying microbiological pollutants (like viruses), this is not the best-practice way to treat waste in connection with the COVID-19 epidemic. There are **safer alternatives** for residual waste treatment like **biological treatment processes** (compost, MBT) which are ordinarily required to ensure sanitisation. For example, compost sites are traditionally accustomed to tackling bio-hazards (they are used to dealing with virus-affected animal carcasses after viral outbreaks).

In terms of residual waste treatment, the focus should be on moving from incineration and Mechanical Biological Treatment (MBT) to Material Recovery and Biological Treatment (MRBT) sites as a transitional strategy. These sites are **more fit to address the current climate and environmental challenges**. MRBT sites are ordinarily required to ensure sanitisation and could help tackling future crises such as COVID-19.

In the long-term we need to invest in city-scale zero waste systems which build circular economies at the local level, require much less capital, and create multiple social impacts. Combined with educational programmes and community involvement, these systems could greatly reduce the tonnes of waste disposed of, thus avoiding serious environmental harm from waste disposal and incineration. Local systems can build resilient infrastructures and services that can be adapted and expanded.

Do you want to know more on incineration?

- Read our [Statement on COVID-19 & waste management](#)
- Read [The EC Guidelines on Waste management in the context of the coronavirus crisis](#)

Find out more about our work on [Climate, Energy and Air Pollution](#)

What's the impact of COVID-19 on delivery services and disposables?

With all the restaurants closed, food delivery is the only alternative to home cooking and it is increasing single use packaging use. The same is happening for ecommerce.

We understand deliveries help local businesses in a difficult time when they can only rely on take away. This could be an opportunity to rethink delivery systems and scale existing solutions up. We need to support business models with resilient and efficient systems, including **reverse logistics operations for reusables** and short supply chains that can contribute to the local economy.

Do you want to know more on deliveries?

- Read our [DRS Manifesto](#)
- Read [The story of RePack: a simple solution to the growing problem of e-commerce waste](#)

Find out more about our work on [Consumption & Production](#) & [Plastic Pollution](#)

What is industry doing?

We are seeing companies using the pandemic as an excuse to create wiggle room in their commitments and halt attempts to push towards ambitious progress (ie. reducing their single use plastic footprint, etc.). **Industry should not use this situation as an opportunity to push for their own agenda** and interfere with recent achievements, like the SUP Directive, the EU Green Deal, and the Circular Economy Action Plan.

Do you want to know more on industry moves?

- Read the [Rethink Plastic alliance blog](#) on industry deplorable moves
- Read what [Frans Timmermans](#), Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal, said about these moves
- Read the Alianza Residuo Cero [message](#) to the Spanish government
- Read what [Greenpeace wrote](#) about the plastic industry exploiting COVID-19 related anxiety to attack reusable bags

What to do with medical waste?

The Commission guidance on Waste Management in the context of COVID-19 says waste from healthcare services, laboratories and related activities associated with coronavirus patients should be handled and treated according to the EU law on waste and national provisions applying to this category of infectious waste.

Member States should ensure proper planning of capacities for treatment and, where necessary, storage of medical waste. In case of treatment disruptions due to lack of dedicated disposal, it is paramount that waste is safely stored temporarily until the capacity issue is solved. So there is no preference for incineration.

Both the World Health Organization and the [United Nations Environment Program](#) (UNEP) have endorsed steam-based or other non-incineration methods of disinfection over incineration because of the persistent organic pollutants (POPs) produced by incineration.

Do you want to know more on medical waste?

- Read Health Care Without Harm's [comprehensive document](#) with the latest information and recommendations on how to address medical waste management in the coronavirus context.
- Read Break Free From Plastic [blog](#) on how waste audits are effective in reducing harmful single-use plastics in hospitals
- Read HCWH's [feedback](#) on the Climate change mitigation and adaptation taxonomy consultation

How is COVID-19 affecting waste pickers?

Waste pickers, grassroots recyclers and sanitation workers are on the frontlines of COVID-19, providing essential work at their own risk.

The current situation reveals the historical debt that society owes to waste pickers, who are a critical part of the movement towards zero waste since they increase reuse, recovery and recycling rates for the benefit of nature and society.

Do you want to know more on waste pickers?

- Read GAIA's blog on [society's historical debt to waste pickers](#)
- Read more on [GAIA](#) and [BFFP](#)
- [Donate](#) to the Emergency solidarity fund.

Find out more about our work at the [global level](#)

What's next? How to move forward from this situation?

There is growing [scientific evidence](#) showcasing how our current methods of treating the environment, driven by unsustainable consumption & production models, will only lead to further pandemics in the future. The impact of Coronavirus has shown how unresilient our system is.

Building a green and just economic recovery is critical to address environmental challenges but also to ensure resilience when global crises, like COVID-19, happen.

The financial response by Member States, and governments across the world, proves that when an urgent crisis appears, access to billions of capital can be found. The interlinked crises that face our natural environment today, from **climate change** to **biodiversity loss**, provide an existential threat to our lives and society.

We should face these crises with the same vigour, pace and determination as has been shown by leaders over the past couple of months in the COVID-19 immediate response.

Read our messages to EU leaders

- [Zero Waste Europe Open letter](#)
- [BFFP open letter to the EC](#)

Hungry for good news? We have it!

Reusable nappies

As a result of the pandemic situation some retailers have been facing an increasing demand for reusable nappies and cloth wipes as a result of worries about not being able to buy enough disposable nappies and baby wet wipes. This may be also the case for similar products such as menstrual products and wet wipes. It is a good sign that people are rediscovering/discovering reusable sanitary items and an opportunity for this market to grow.

Find out more about our work on [Menstrual Products, Nappies & Wet Wipes](#)

Tap water

A positive behaviour shift could be the increase in tap water use, as water bottles are mostly consumed by tourists and people spending their days outside. Getting used to drinking tap water at home could make people realise its value and will hopefully lead to them continuing to drink it outside with a reusable bottle.

Food waste prevention

With the quarantine, people might be inclined to plan their meals before going to the shops in order to have enough food for the longest period possible. By planning ahead and having more time to cook, people are more likely to ensure nothing is wasted, including by freezing perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables. Another positive point in the quarantine is that it could boost people's creativity in the kitchen, by learning how to cook with food surpluses and using everything that's about to expire.

Do you want to know more on food waste?

Read our [feedback on the Farm to Fork strategy](#), Policy Briefing on [Food Systems](#), the Case Studies on [Too Good To Go](#), [Phenix](#) and the city of [Bruges](#).

Remember that if you want to ask a specific question or leave a comment, you can [contact us](#) directly!

More Reads

- [COVID-19 and what it means for our team, for consumers, and for zero waste globally](#)
- [The Rethink Plastic alliance and COVID-19](#)

We are not health care professionals or scientists, please follow health professionals recommendations: hand washing, social distancing, and respiratory hygiene techniques should be used to avoid contamination.



Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, businesses, experts, and change agents working towards the same vision: phasing out waste from our society. We empower communities to redesign their relationship with resources, to adopt smarter lifestyles and sustainable consumption patterns, and to think circular.