

Plastic straws, cotton buds and stirrers

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This guidance is for England

The Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020 prohibit the supply, or offering to supply, any plastic cotton bud in England. The ban on these products came into force in October 2020.

Damage caused

The Regulations have been introduced to reduce plastic pollution in the oceans. It is estimated we use 4.7 billion plastic straws, 316 million plastic stirrers and 1.8 billion plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England every year, many of which find their way into our ocean. By banning the supply of these items, the Government aims to further protect our marine wildlife and ultimately eliminate all avoidable plastic waste, as set out in the 25-year environment plan.

Plastic straws, cotton bud stems and drink stirrers are consistently in the 10 most commonly found items in beach surveys. Around 15% of plastic ocean waste washes up on shore, which can increase the risk to public health from contact on beaches and bathing waters. The rest remains in the ocean where fish and other marine animals can eat them (because of their size), introducing potentially toxic substances into the food chain.

Campaigns to promote behaviour change have failed to stop the irresponsible disposal of these items. Cotton buds are commonly flushed down toilets and sewage treatment works cannot prevent all of them reaching the sea. When entering sewage systems the plastic stems do not settle with organics; their buoyancy allows them to flow through plant equipment and their narrow diameter means they are not caught by all screens. Straws and drink stirrers are rarely recycled due to their size and the effort required to remove any food debris.

Products covered by the ban

The ban only applies to single-use plastic straws and cotton buds, and plastic drink stirrers.

The Regulations define 'plastic' as "a material consisting of polymer to which additives or other substances may have been added, and which can function as a main structural component of final products" this does not include natural polymers that have not been chemically modified.

'Single-use plastic-stemmed cotton buds' are rods made wholly or partly of plastic, which have cotton wrapped around both ends; 'single-use plastic straws' are those that are made wholly or partly from plastic. Neither are designed or intended to be re-used. These products must not be supplied to end-users except in certain circumstances as outlined below. This does not prohibit supply to businesses. Some drinking straws made from paper do contain small amounts of plastic in the adhesive lining, and these are still permitted.

'Plastic drink stirrers' are those made wholly or partly of plastic and used for stirring drinks. These must not be supplied in any circumstances; there are no exceptions.

Exceptions

There are a number of exceptions to the prohibitions to allow for situations where these items may be required due to disability or accessibility issues.

The following supplies of single-use plastic straws are permitted:

- from a registered pharmacy, but products must not be displayed or advertised in store
- from a catering establishment (pubs, clubs, restaurants, canteens, etc) where supplied for immediate consumption of food or drink. They must only be supplied if requested and not available for customers to help themselves; they cannot be offered either verbally or in writing
- where they are being used as a medical device or for a medical purpose. This includes preventative medicine, medical diagnosis, research, and care and treatment
- where it is being used as packaging for a product - for example, certain medicines
- for use in care homes, prisons, schools and early years provision, but alternatives should be sought where possible

The following supplies of plastic cotton buds are permitted:

- where it is being used as a medical device or for a medical purpose. This includes preventative medicine, medical diagnosis, research and care and treatment
- for forensic purposes: use by forensic service providers
- for scientific purposes: diagnostic, education and research

Penalties

Failure to comply with trading standards law can lead to enforcement action and to sanctions, which may include a fine and/or imprisonment. For more information please see 'Trading standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

Key legislation

Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020

New guidance: October 2020

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links may only show the original version of the legislation, although some amending legislation is linked to separately where it is directly related to the content of a guide. Information on amendments to legislation can be found on each link's 'More Resources' tab.

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