

Microbeads: Frequently Asked Questions

What are microbeads?

Microbeads are tiny synthetic plastic particles used as an abrasive in many personal-care and beauty products, such as facial scrubs, soaps and toothpastes.

When consumers use personal-care products containing microbeads, these tiny plastic particles don't dissolve. Instead, they are rinsed down the drain and, because of their small size and buoyancy, microbeads escape treatment by sewage plants and are discharged into our rivers and lakes.

Are microbeads harmful to the environment?

Once in the water, microbeads, like other plastics, can absorb persistent toxic chemicals commonly found in waterways and can be mistaken for food by small fish and wildlife. Studies have shown that fish and wildlife of all sizes consume plastic, raising serious concerns about the impacts of microbeads on aquatic species.

Do alternatives exist?

Readily available natural alternatives exist, such as ground almonds, oatmeal and pumice, making the phase-out of synthetic microbeads a common sense step to keep plastics out of our waterways.

Are states considering microbead-free waters legislation?

Responding to a rising tide of concern among researchers and the public about the impact of microbeads on the Great Lakes, state legislators around the region have proposed microbead-free waters legislation. Illinois was the first state in the nation to pass legislation phasing out the manufacture and sale of microbeads in personal care products. Several Great Lakes states are also actively working on microbead-free waters legislation.

While each state's legislation varies slightly, the bills are similar in that they would phase-out the manufacture and sale of personal care products containing microbeads within the next few years. With many readily available alternatives to microbeads, phasing out the use of these plastic particles in personal-care products is a common sense step forward in region-wide efforts to keep plastic pollution out of the Great Lakes.

Aren't companies already phasing out microbeads?

Several leading beauty-product manufacturers including Proctor & Gamble, Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive, Johnson & Johnson, The Body Shop, and L'Oreal have all made recent commitments to phase out the use of microbeads in their products.

How do I know if the personal-care or beauty products I use contain microbeads?

Consumers can determine if their personal care or beauty products contain microbeads by checking the product ingredient list for "polyethylene" or "polypropylene."



Tiny synthetic plastic particles called microbeads, used as an abrasive in personal-care products such as facial scrubs, soaps and toothpastes are causing concern in the Great Lakes.
Photo: Olga Lyandres