



Cigarette Butts

Cigarette butts contain hazardous chemicals such as cadmium, arsenic and lead that are partially filtered out during smoking. But when the butt is discarded, these chemicals leach into the environment contaminating our waterways and land.⁵

Cigarette butts and the environment

Since the first Clean Up Australia Day in 1990, cigarette butts have consistently been one of the most common items found by Clean Up volunteers.

While most people are aware of the health risks involved in smoking, few seem to realise that cigarettes are also bad for the environment. Cigarette butts may seem small, but with an estimated 4.5 trillion butts (worldwide) littered every year, the toxic chemicals add up.¹

Butts contain hazardous chemicals such as cadmium, arsenic and lead that are partially filtered out during the smoking process. When butts are discarded, wind and rain carry them into the water supply. The toxic chemicals they contain are then leached into aquatic ecosystems, threatening the quality of the water and marine life.

What are butts made of?

Cigarette filters or butts are made from fibrous material designed to trap tar and other toxic chemicals before they reach the smoker's lungs. The filters are made from cellulose acetate (a material similar to rayon) and are coated with paper.

Each butt contains the remnants of tobacco, paper and a filter. The residue in the butts contains toxic, soluble chemicals. These chemicals are deadly and add to the existing cocktail of environmental pollution.

Environmental impacts of discarded butts:

Cigarette butts have become one of our most important litter issues. The problem has increased in recent years with government legislation for smoking restrictions in public buildings and restaurants forcing smokers outside, where butts are often littered.

An estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are littered worldwide every year.¹ Not only do littered butts seriously reduce the aesthetic quality of any environment, but they can cause a great deal of harm.

Areas with a high number of littered cigarette butts look dirty and uncared for, which attracts more littering of other rubbish items.

If a butt is simply dropped, it can smoulder for up to 3 hours. Cigarette smoke contains up to 4,000 chemicals so each second the butt is left alight, dangerous toxins are released into the environment.

Flicked butts can cause fires. When thrown from a motor vehicle into dried grass butts can start a grassfire or even a bushfire.

The Australian Fire Authorities Council estimates that more than 12 fires a day are caused by cigarettes or smoking materials.

Did you know?

- Cigarette smoke contains up to 4,000 chemicals.
- Cigarette butts take, on average, 1.5 years to break down.
- Almost 50% of all litter in urban areas is tobacco related products including butts, cellophane wrapping, foil inserts and packaging.⁴
- An estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are littered worldwide every year.¹
- About 24 billion cigarettes are sold in Australia each year. It is estimated that 7 billion of these cigarettes are littered.⁹
- An estimated 100 000 tonnes of polluted air is exhaled by smokers in NSW each year.¹⁰
- In some parts of Australia, if caught littering cigarette butts you can receive a fine of up to \$2,000 if the matter goes to court.⁴
- Cigarettes accounted for 17% of the total rubbish items collected on 2004 Clean Up Australia Day.
- A cigarette butt can smoulder for up to three hours causing a grass fire or even a bushfire.
- Over 4,500 fires a year are caused by cigarettes and smokers' materials.

Clean Up - inspiring and working with all Australians to clean up, fix up and conserve our environment.

Cigarette Butts and Stormwater

When it rains, cigarette butts lying in our streets and gutters are carried via stormwater directly into our harbours, beaches and rivers. The chemicals contained in these butts and the butts themselves impact on our water quality and can be deadly to marine life.

The impact of cigarette butts on marine life:

Many people don't realise that when it rains, water flowing through our streets, down our drains and through our stormwater pipes ends up in our harbours, beaches and rivers.

Stormwater is not treated so all litter and cigarette butts carried by stormwater are dumped directly into these waterways. In fact, 95% of the litter on beaches comes from suburban streets through the stormwater system. This litter reduces water quality and potentially harms our precious marine life.⁴

Cigarette butts can take up to 12 months to break down in freshwater and up to 5 years to break down in seawater. Birds and aquatic animals can mistake the butts as food, resulting in serious digestive problems that may lead to death. Butts have been found in the stomachs of young birds, sea turtles and other marine creatures.⁴

Another serious concern is that toxic chemicals such as lead and cadmium, which are trapped in the cigarette filter, can leach out in water. Within just one hour of contact with water, the chemicals begin to leach into the aquatic environment and threaten the wellbeing of marine life.

Fines for cigarette litter:

- *Cigarette packet: \$60
 - *Unlit or extinguished cigarettes: \$60
 - *Lit cigarettes in dangerous circumstances e.g. in dry bush: \$375 for individuals or \$750 for corporations
 - *Any cigarette item deposited from a motor vehicle: \$200 for individuals or \$400 for corporations
 - *Lit cigarette not covered by points above: \$200
- (Source NSW EPA 2001)

So what can I do?

Always dispose of cigarette butts responsibly. You can do this by using a Go Green Pocket Ashtray. The small, green ashtray fits easily into a pocket or handbag. The ashtrays are fire resistant and re-usable and can be purchased from any Coles or Bi-Lo supermarket.

Alternatively, you can reuse empty film canisters. Just drop the butt in, seal the airtight lid and shake the container. Don't grind the butt onto the plastic as it may melt.

Businesses and other organisations looking for permanent cigarette butt litter solutions can contact BUTTsOUT⁸ for a range of products.

You can also help to educate those around you such as friends, family and co-workers about the impacts of littering cigarette butts and encourage them not to litter.



References

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www.cigarettelitter.org
- ² **No Butts About it Litter Campaign**
hometown.aol.com/teamstein/myhometown/index.html
- ³ **NSW Department of Environment and Conservation**
www.dec.nsw.gov.au
- ⁴ **EcoRecycle**
www.ecorecycle.vic.gov.au
- ⁵ **Keep Australia Beautiful – Victoria**
www.kabv.org.au
- ⁶ **Clean Up Australia 2005 Rubbish Report**
www.cleanup.com.au
- ⁷ **Victorian Litter Action Alliance**
www.litter.vic.gov.au
- ⁸ **BUTTsOUT**
www.buttsout.net/australia
1300 308 382
- ⁹ **Butt Littering Trust**
www.buttlitteringtrust.org
- ¹⁰ **Sydney City Council**
www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au



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