

Friday Facts: Choosing the Right Green Product



Today, many products are marketed using eco-friendly terms to appeal to consumers. However, not all products that are labeled “green” or “natural” are truly environmentally friendly. How can you tell if a company is trying to put an eco-friendly spin on a product that is not truly environmentally friendly? These tips can help you avoid “greenwashing” and make wiser, greener choices that really make a difference.

Look for these red flags.

Vague claims. Words like "natural," "green," "eco," "nontoxic" and even "biodegradable" don't necessarily guarantee anything on their own. They're easy to stamp on a product because they're not currently regulated. Look for more definitive terms like "organic" and "recycled," which are overseen more closely by the federal government and verified with a symbol on the package. And note that "recyclable" just means you might be able to recycle the product in your community, while "recycled" actually means the company has incorporated recycled materials in the product.)

Pretty packaging. Beware of products like cosmetics and household cleaners, which are adopting "natural" looking packaging designs. Is your shampoo really made from flowers or has it simply added 1 percent flower oil to its chemical mix? Read the ingredients to find out.

Non-transparent claims. If a company doesn't explain its green claims on the product packaging, it should make the information available on its web site or through its customer service department. Look for a phone number or web address on the package — if you can't find it, or if it's hard to get more details once you contact the company, there's something shady going on.

Big promises. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Is that foam egg carton really recyclable? Can a biodegradable diaper really biodegrade if it's buried in a landfill? Companies want to ease your mind with such promises — but don't just take their word for it? Learn as much as you can about the facts behind the claims.

Use these tips for smarter shopping.

Look for certification. There are a few trustworthy certifications out there that, while not perfect, are reliable. Use them as your guide. Look for the federal government's Energy Star designation on appliances and electronics; the USDA organic seal on food and cosmetics; Green Seal on household cleaning products; and the Forest Stewardship Council logo on wood and paper products. Also, beware of questionable labels such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative label, which was concocted by the timber lobby.

Think about *how* you buy, not just *what* you buy. Green products can be great, but the choices you make when you buy any product can be just as important when it comes to lessening your impact. Some tips: Buy in bulk to reduce individual packaging; when you buy a product or package that's recyclable, make sure it's actually recyclable in your area (and make sure to actually recycle it!); buy durables instead of disposables (things like rechargeable batteries and reusable mugs); and always think carefully about whether you really need the item in the first place.

Do your research. Sometimes you've got to make a decision while standing in the grocery aisle, but if you have time in advance or if you're considering a bigger purchase — like a car, washing machine or TV — it pays to do some digging ahead of time. Sites like Consumer Reports' [GreenerChoices.org](http://www.greenerchoices.org), [Greenercars.org](http://www.greenercars.org) and the [Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool \(EPEAT\)](#) can help you make sense of manufacturers' claims on big-ticket items; the [Environmental Working Group](#) and [Responsible Purchasing Network](#) have helpful information on smaller items like cosmetics, cleaners and food.

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