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Breaking America's Paper Towel Addiction

□ Gemma Alexander □ February 18, 2019



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It's common knowledge that Americans use more disposable items than the rest of the world. But according to data collected by market-research firm Euromonitor International, Americans' use of paper towels is almost an obsession.

Americans spend \$5.7 billion dollars a year on paper towels for home use — nearly half the global total, and nearly \$5 billion more than each of the next four biggest paper towel spenders. Even taking population into account, it's a lot. In 2017, the average American spent \$17.50 on paper towels. That's a full third higher than the next highest user, Norway, with an average of \$11.70 per person. It's not just because Americans are using paper towels as napkins either — Americans buy more paper napkins than other nations, too.

How Do They Do It?

The dramatic disparity in paper towel use naturally raises the question — what do people in other countries do in circumstances where Americans reach for a paper towel? According to a 2016 Nielson survey, the answer depends on where you ask. It turns out that cleaning product preferences vary widely among different regions of the world.

Aside from the United States, the top users of paper towels are all European. But overall, Europeans are more likely to reach for sponges. In Latin America, scrub brushes are the most used cleaning tool, while mops and brooms are most used in the Asia-Pacific region. People in Africa and the Middle East do more cleaning with cloth towels.

Replacing the Roll

Some of the tasks Americans complete with paper towels could be equally well accomplished with reusable cloth towels or sponges. Microfiber cleaning cloths have properties that make them exceptionally good for cleaning, but they do contribute to the problem of ocean microplastic pollution. Old washcloths and cut up old towels and t-shirts made from natural fibers are cheaper and almost as effective. Color code your rags or use different fabrics for different purposes to avoid cross-contamination.

Kitchen sponges can do a lot of the work of paper towels, but they come with their own environmental issues. Avoid the synthetic two-sided scrub sponges and stick with a scrub brush like they do in Latin America. You can also scrub with a natural loofah, which comes from a gourd, or keep a recyclable metal scour on hand. For the sponge itself, opt for the pop-up cellulose kind, which are biodegradable. To keep bacteria to a minimum, run your sponges through the dishwasher every day or soak them in vinegar.

Reinventing the Roll

There are some uses, like wiping off a greasy pan or picking up the cat's hairball, when you really just want something disposable. For those times, consider a tree-free disposable towel made from bamboo and sugar cane or from recycled paper.

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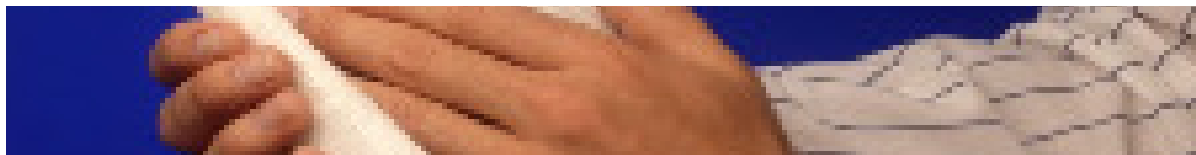


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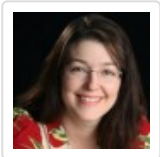




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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).