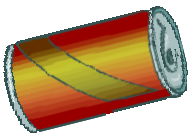
How Long Does Litter Last?

Litter and illegal dumping are serious problems. While out enjoying your neighborhood, local parks, and recreation areas, have you ever come across some litter and wondered how long it will be there if no one picks it up? This chart shows the average number of years it takes for common litter items to biodegrade, or rot after disposal:

	Cigarette butts: 1 - 5 years Not only do cigarette butts last a long time, they are often thrown from a vehicle which means the cigarette butts end up in the street. These butts will eventually end up in the storm drains that lead directly to our creeks and to San Francisco Bay.
	Leftovers: 2 years Throwing banana peels, apple cores, or your sandwich from the car is littering. Don't let anyone tell you that if it's biodegradable it's not litter.
	Plastic shopping bag: 10 - 20 years Kids are starting to think plastic bags grow on bushes. Recycle your plastic shopping bags by returning them to the store. Utilize reusable shopping bags made of cloth or hemp.
	**Aluminum can: 500 years** An aluminum can carelessly littered today could be found in the same spot by our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren.
	Disposable diaper: More than 500 years Do you really want our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren judging us on this one?
	Fishing line: 600 years **Fishing net: 30 - 40 years** Even when torn and lost, nylon fishing line and nets continue “ghost fishing.” As a result, virtually every marine species, including whales, is in danger of being snared by great tangles of nylon loose in the oceans.
	Plastic bottle: May be around forever In a recent study of litter clean-ups, plastics accounted for 30% of the litter volume. Take it with you and recycle.
	Styrofoam: May be around forever Another littered item that comes in many shapes and forms, from food boxes and coffee cups to "peanuts" used in packing and the lightweight foam pieces that cushion new appliances and electronics. It will never break down, no matter how long it sits.
	Glass bottle: May be around forever A minute on the lips, 1,000,000 lifetimes on the side of the road.

Note: *These averages may be even longer in our mild California climate.*

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