

## CHAPTER 3

# Reduce Your Carbon Footprint: 26 Ways to Live More Sustainably

By Rebecca Gao

We can't all be Greta, but anyone can help reduce global carbon emissions by lowering their carbon footprint. Here are 26 tried-and-true ways to do your part.



# 26 ways to reduce your carbon footprint

Environmentalists have long been branded as granola-eating treehuggers who care more about the planet than about people. But whether you look at that as a good thing or a bad thing (granola is pretty delicious, and who doesn't like a tree?), it's not exactly accurate.

The biggest reason climate change is a problem for humans is—well, because it's a problem for humans. Global warming will affect (and is affecting) plants, animals and fungi too, but overall, the planet will keep going long after people are gone.

But if we want life here to be comfortable, we need to do something serious about climate change—right now.

That's where carbon footprints come in, and why it's important that we all work to shrink our shoe size, so to speak. Some of the actions are easy, some a little harder, but think of it as a collective challenge we'll look back on fondly, like that mud race you did with your college roomies in a fit of fitness optimism.

Reducing our global carbon footprint is going to take concerted effort from governments, companies and individuals across the planet. And the best way to get started is in your own backyard—plus your kitchen, garage and bathroom.

Read on to learn more about carbon footprints and global warming and to find out what lifestyle changes are the most effective ways to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions and lower your impact.

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Photo by Dustan Woodhouse on Unsplash

### 3.1

## What is a carbon footprint, and how do I measure it?

Before we dive in, let's run through a quick refresher on carbon footprints (you can always jog your memory with a re-read of Chapter 2). In basic terms, **your carbon footprint is a representation of the total amount of climate-changing greenhouse gases you produce as you make your way through your daily life.**

You know when someone won't leave your party, even after you've turned up the lights and started doing the dishes? That's a lingerer. Greenhouse gases do the same thing, but in the atmosphere, and they invite solar energy along for the ride.

Where do these GHGs come from? Basically, everything we do, from turning on the blender for our post-workout power smoothie to driving off to a lakeside getaway at the end of a tough week, uses energy and other resources that create emissions of various gases. The bulk of these emissions come from burning fossil fuels (that's the gas in your car), land use changes like deforestation (to grow the cattle feed so you can get your whey protein) and generating electricity (which is often fossil fuels again).

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And despite the name, a carbon footprint is about more than just carbon. It includes all your other GHG emissions, like methane and nitrous oxide. Carbon footprint calculators will do the math (so you don't have to) and convert everything into the carbon dioxide equivalent, which is abbreviated as CO<sub>2</sub>e.

Information overload? Let's take three deep breaths before we carry on. And don't worry, we promise not to quiz you at the end.

### **How much do we need to reduce our carbon footprints?**

Honestly? A lot. For Americans, that number is about 90 percent.

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has said that if we don't act now, we'll be facing the severe effects of a warming planet as early as 2040. One example? 50 million people around the world, including here in the U.S., [will be exposed to the effects](#) of increased

# Paris Agreement on Climate Change (COP21)

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KEEP GLOBAL TEMPERATURE RISE

Well below **2°C** With aspiration to **1.5°C**

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**ALL COUNTRIES TO REPORT REGULARLY** on their emissions and efforts to reduce them ———→ New transparency and accounting system in place

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**EVERY 5 YEARS** **REVIEW EACH COUNTRY'S CONTRIBUTIONS** to GHG emissions cuts so that they can be scaled up

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Developed countries to provide **\$100BN** climate finance per year **until 2025**

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coastal flooding. (That's bland scientific language for everything from "frequent basement floods" to "islands completely disappearing.")

Remember [the 2016 Paris Agreement](#)? It was an international pact to find climate change solutions and aimed to limit the rise in global average temperatures to under 2°C (3.6°F) above pre-industrial levels—and ideally, under 1.5°C (2.7°F).

How does that affect you? The [Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project](#) says the target

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for all countries should be to cap energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions at 1.7 tCO<sub>2</sub>e per person, as a global average, by 2050. Currently, the U.S. carbon footprint related to energy is around [16 tCO<sub>2</sub>e per capita](#). That means Americans need to cut their emissions by almost 90 percent.

Achieving this goal, and the Paris Agreement targets, will require a herculean effort and commitment from all of us. And a big part of that is how we live our daily lives. By lowering your personal carbon footprint, you won't just be reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. You'll also be contributing to a positive [ripple effect](#), normalizing a more sustainable way of living and helping to change prevailing attitudes.

Ready to get started? Here are 26 ways you can be part of the solution.



Photo by Cameron Casey from Pexels

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## 3.2 Cut back on the gas guzzling

It turns out that we *really* like the convenience of vehicles. And since most of them use internal combustion engines, transportation is the largest source of carbon emissions in the U.S., accounting for about [28 percent of all GHG emissions](#).

The reality is, we all have to get around, and we shouldn’t feel personally guilty for the way our society is structured. Many of us need our cars for commutes, trains for business conferences and planes to visit family and friends.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t change things for the better. If we ask ourselves, “Is this necessary?” it’s easy to discover winning solutions. Can that business meeting happen over Zoom? Maybe you can carpool or opt for transit sometimes. Or maybe the next time

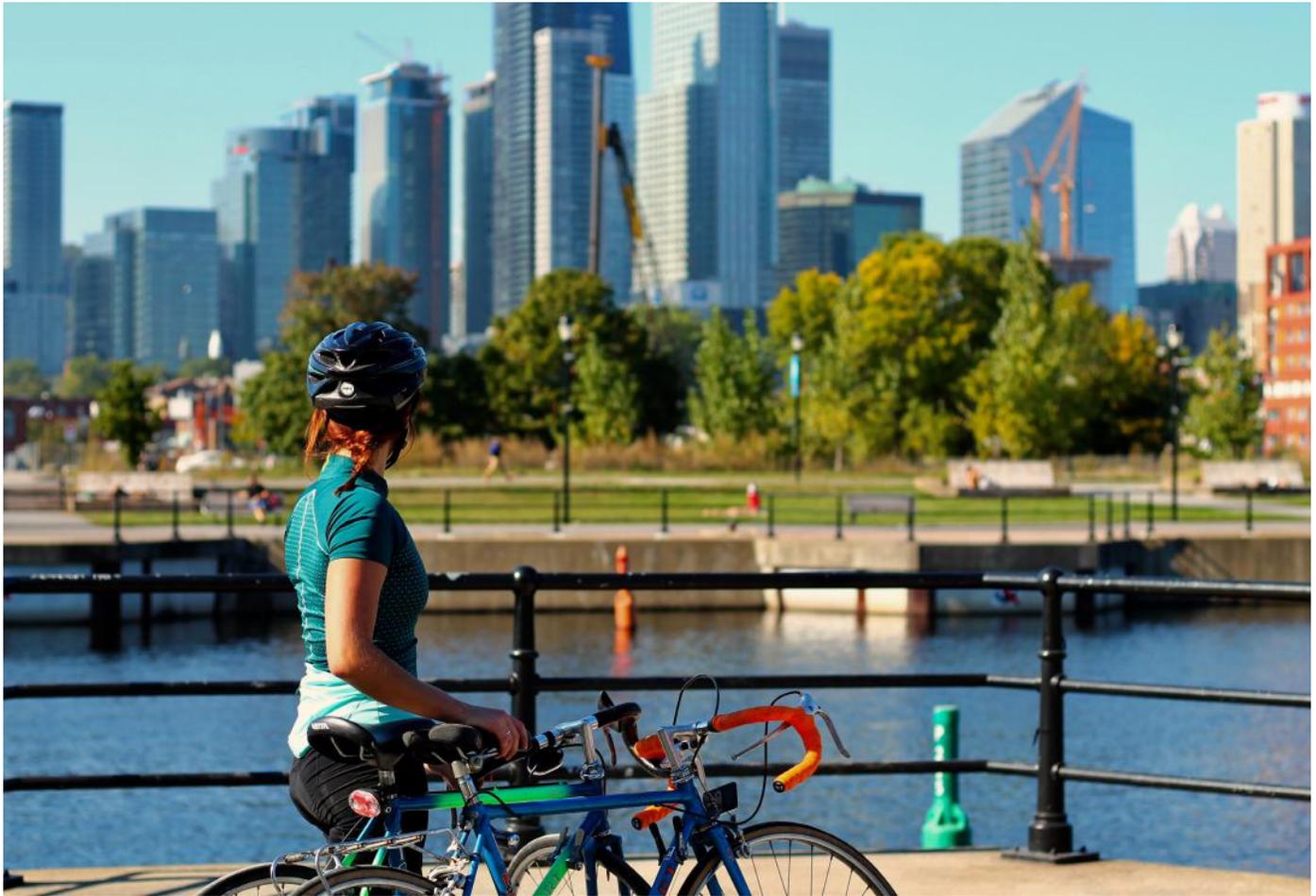


Photo by Roxanne Desgagnés on Unsplash

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**“ Cars alone account for about half of the carbon footprint of a typical two-vehicle American family.**

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you move, you can pick a walkable neighbourhood so you don't need a car at all.

Cars alone account for about half of [the carbon footprint](#) of a typical two-vehicle American family. Here's the kicker: transportation's carbon footprint is so outsized not just because we drive a lot, but because Americans have been buying larger vehicles (which use more gas per mile) and [flying more](#).

Your transportation choices make a big impact. Try these simple tips to reduce your transportation carbon footprint. Hey, it'll save you money, too.

### 1. Spend less time in your car

It's easier said than done, but living car-free can significantly reduce your carbon footprint. In fact, [going without your car for a year](#) could cut more than 15 percent of your emissions. Walking, biking (both A+ for your health) and [taking public transit](#) are alternatives that reduce your carbon footprint while getting you where you need to go.

If ditching your car entirely sounds too drastic (it's okay, we can only do our best), you could opt to reduce the amount you drive. Working from home even just once a week, for example, will reduce your commuting footprint by 20 percent.

When you do have to commute to work, carpooling will drive down emissions. Combining errands to make fewer trips will also help reduce fuel usage, and walking to your neighborhood market for essentials is a nice way to support local while curbing GHGs.

## 2. Choose a fuel-efficient vehicle (but don't upgrade too fast)

If you do need a car for your day-to-day activities, **driving a fuel-efficient vehicle (one that gets more miles per gallon) will greatly knock down your emissions.**

Choose a smaller car or a hybrid or electric vehicle when it comes time to upgrade. Some small cars run [50 miles per gallon](#), whereas pickup trucks might run in the high 20s. Added bonus: you'll seriously save on gas.

One key point, though: New cars [generate anywhere](#) from 6 to 35 tCO<sub>2e</sub> during the manufacturing process, depending on the type of car and materials needed, which counteracts the fuel-efficient benefits of switching in the first place. That's major, especially considering the average [American's carbon footprint is about 18 tCO<sub>2e</sub>](#) per year.

So while driving an electric car or a hybrid can help cut down on emissions in the long run, there's no need to rush to upgrade to something new, no matter how shiny it is. The production of vehicles is actually hugely carbon intensive and may take away the gains from opting for an energy-efficient model.

If you are buying a new car, look for a [SmartWay-certified](#) vehicle—this government program run by the EPA certifies the lowest emitting cars each year. Thankfully, it's really that simple.

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## 3. Make your ride more fuel-efficient

It's not just what you drive that matters, but also *how* you drive. Welcome to Fuel-Efficient Driving School 101: You can save gas by [accelerating and braking gradually, subduing your inner speed demon mileage](#)

[usually decreases when you go faster than 50 miles per hour](#)) and using cruise control, especially on long hauls. And don't be that person who leaves the car idling while chatting with neighbors.

If you're packing cargo, use a hitch-mounted rack (the kind that attaches to the back of your car) instead of roof-top boxes to make your car more aerodynamic. Ask any F1 car designer; aerodynamics save on fuel, big time.

Don't snooze on maintenance, either. [Servicing your car regularly](#) can help keep it running efficiently. Simple things like checking and adjusting tire pressure and upgrading motor oil can increase fuel efficiency. Tending to a more serious problem, like a faulty oxygen sensor—which measures the composition of your [car's exhaust](#) and helps calculate how much fuel to use—can improve mileage by as much as 40 percent.



## 4. Fly mindfully

We're sorry to say it, world travelers, but despite how fun and easy it is to jet to a new place, those flights are a major contributor to your carbon footprint. Huge.

But that doesn't mean you can't take a vacation or see the world. Just be more mindful. Take longer and fewer trips, and fewer flights overall—like, maybe once you're in Europe, you get from city to city by train instead of discount air.

Consider this when booking a ticket: An economy-class return flight from Los Angeles to Sydney [emits about 3.36 tCO<sub>2e</sub>](#) per passenger. That's more than

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20 percent of the average American’s annual carbon footprint (and more than our target footprint). And that’s just one trip. Since each metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted leads to about [3 square meters \(32.3 square feet\) of Arctic ice loss](#), it’s safe to estimate that one surf vacation down under could mean the loss of about 10 square meters of Arctic ice—that’s more than 100 square feet.

Until planes can fly without fossil fuels, skipping air travel—or at least flying less—is a hugely effective way to pare down your travel carbon footprint. And when you do need to fly, look into carbon offsetting—more on that in Chapter 4. You can use a flight carbon calculator app or website ([we like carbonfootprint.com](#)) to do the math on your emissions.

## 5. Economy > business class

Business class is certainly more glamorous, but it does pose a tricky ethical dilemma. Here’s why: The more people on a flight, the smaller the airplane’s carbon footprint is per person. In other words, your carbon footprint when flying has a lot to do with the size of the seat you choose. And [business class is usually between two or three times](#) as energy intensive as economy, with first class as much as four times as bad.

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## PLANET-FRIENDLY PLANT FOODS

Faux meat is processed, but it’s still sustainable: imitation beef products like Impossible Burger and Beyond Burger create about 5 percent of the emissions of real meat.

An even more planet-friendly pick? The carbon footprint of legumes like peas and lentils is less than 3 percent that of beef, making them the official winner among protein-rich foods from the climate’s POV.

In the end, while the relative healthfulness of processed meat substitutes is up for debate, when it comes to global warming, that plant-based burger patty or “neatball” is the better option, whether it was made in a factory or your own kitchen.





Photo by Lisa Fotios from Pexels

### 3.3 Eat your way to a healthier planet

Here’s an easier one you can practice every day. According to a [University of Oxford study](#), the food supply chain is responsible for about a quarter of all worldwide GHG emissions. That’s a farm-to-table calculation: everything from preparing the soil to turning potatoes into chips to shipping those chips to your local convenience store.

“ In the U.S., food waste generates the equivalent of 37 million cars’ worth of GHG emissions annually.

Food production is carbon-intensive because of things like land use (e.g., deforestation to make way for farm land) and the energy needed for harvesting, processing and transportation.

Then, even after the food is in your fridge, it still plays a role in your carbon footprint: in the U.S., food waste generates the equivalent of 37 million cars’ worth of GHG emissions annually. So think of that doggie bag (in a BYO container if you’re super keen) as a major win in the battle for good.

There are a slew of ways to reduce your food carbon footprint. Here are a few of our easy-to-adopt tips.

#### 6. More bean burritos, fewer beef burgers

Sorry, carnivores, but an extremely effective way to reduce your carbon footprint is to cut back on the amount of animal products you eat, especially lamb and beef.

## How much impact does food have?

Proportion of total greenhouse gas emissions from food

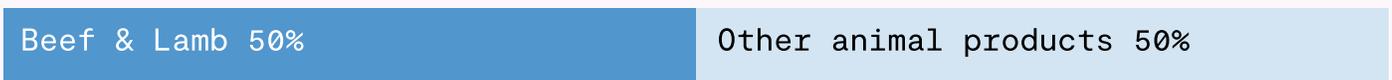
A quarter of global emissions come from **food**



More than half of food emissions come from **animal products**



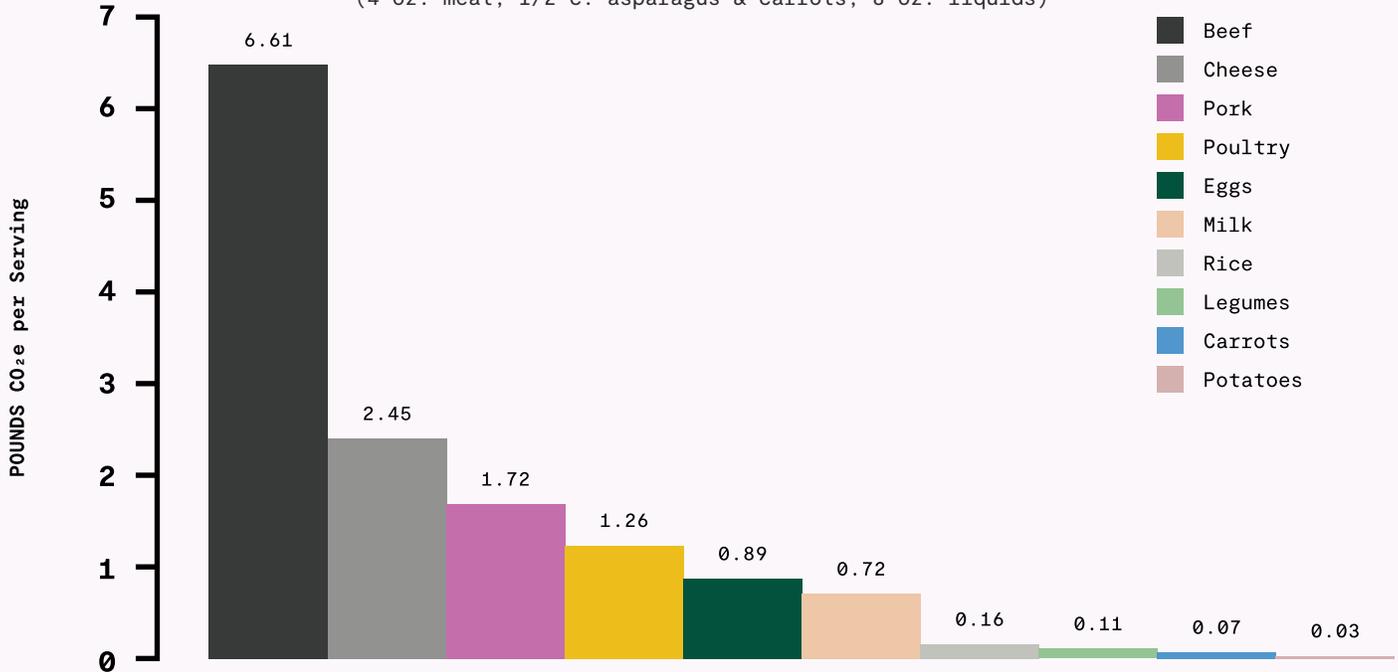
Half of all farmed animal emissions come from **beef and lamb**



[Source](#)

## Pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>e per Serving

(4 oz. meat, 1/2 c. asparagus & carrots, 8 oz. liquids)



[Source](#)



Photo by Dylan de Jonge on Unsplash

Meat and dairy products account for more than [half of food's carbon footprint](#). Does that mean you *have* to become a card-carrying vegan? Nope. Just being mindful of your consumption is meaningful.

And, it's easier than ever. Vegan and plant-based options are everywhere nowadays. You don't have to go cold turkey, but try adopting one or two meatless meals a week to start.

Let's look at meat's large-and-in-charge carbon footprint a bit closer: Livestock uses twice as much land as crops like grains and vegetables, which leads to deforestation and the loss of biodiversity to make room for farmland. Livestock—mainly cattle—also produce methane c/o their stomachs, which are designed to digest coarse plants, but not without side effects.

Methane is a greenhouse gas roughly [25 times](#) more potent than carbon dioxide, meaning that beef's carbon footprint is one of the biggest for farmed animals. (Sadly for those who love everything creamy

and melty, cheese and other dairy products have a big carbon footprint, too. Because, you know, they also mostly come from cows.)

Let's look at some numbers. A kilogram of peas (that's 2.2 pounds) [produces about 0.9 kilograms](#) of CO<sub>2</sub>e. A kilogram of beef? SIXTY kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub>e. That means that the carbon footprint of beef is more than 60 times bigger than the carbon footprint of peas. In fact, beef's carbon footprint is so large that even swapping it for the less carbon-intensive chicken could reduce your meal's carbon footprint by almost 90 percent.

## 7. Fresh from the farm

This one feels good and is, conveniently, very delicious. Land use accounts for the bulk of your food's carbon footprint. But another way to reduce your diet's impact is to choose products that are locally produced, like from the farmers' market. You can sometimes shop locally at grocery stores, too.

This is most important when it comes to products imported by air. [Transporting food by plane](#) versus truck produces almost six times the carbon emissions per mile—and keep in mind it often travels a lot more miles.

Quick tip: Some foods that are commonly [transported by plane to the U.S.](#) include asparagus, green beans and berries. The only way to know for sure is to ask, so make friends with your local greengrocer or produce manager. Skipping flown-in strawberries in winter in favour of locally grown apples is the kind of small swap that can make a big difference.

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**“ Americans waste about 40 percent of the food they buy, throwing out about 1.3 billion tons of food per year.**

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## 8. Wasted food is a wasted opportunity

Your dad was on to something when he told you to eat everything on your plate. Turns out he was being an environmentalist before it was cool.

Did you know that [Americans waste](#) about 40 percent of the food they buy, throwing out about [1.3 billion tons of food](#) per year? Yes, 400 out of every 1,000 calories produced are never ingested. In other words, keeping in mind some of this waste is in restaurants, industry and transportation, we chuck about [a pound of food per day](#) per person, 100 percent wasting the emissions used to grow, produce, transport and buy that food—and adding to our carbon footprint. Yikes.

Thankfully, there are loads of simple solutions to reduce your food waste.

- Take stock of your fridge regularly, especially before shopping, so you don't buy multiples.
- Shop more often, and buy less each trip. By picking up what you need every few days, you can solve a lot of waste from produce spoiling before you could get to it because you didn't know on Sunday that you'd be craving pizza on Wednesday.
- Plan out your meals to manage your pantry and cut down on food spoiling.
- Freeze leftovers to extend the life of your food.
- Hack your leftovers: instead of tossing them, look out for recipes that use leftovers creatively or repurpose your dinner surplus for lunch tomorrow. When in doubt, add sriracha.
- Don't forget to ask for a doggie bag for restaurant leftovers. Future you will thank you once lunchtime rolls around.

## 9. Composting rules

Let's face it, it's tricky to tick all the boxes, and expiration dates can creep up quickly. Don't sweat too much if that well-intended spring mix ends up languishing a bit too long in the crisper. Home composting is your best option to dispose of those droopy greens. In 2017, Americans recovered about [27 million tons of wasted food](#) through composting—that's a massive 165 pounds per person, or close to half a pound per person per day.

Organic waste in landfills generates methane as it decomposes. In fact, [food waste in landfills](#) is the



third-largest source of human-related methane emissions in the country. Composting not only significantly reduces these emissions, but also turns your food waste into [stable soil carbon](#) that can be used as fertilizer.

New to composting? First read up on the [EPA's guidelines](#) for home composting. (It's a quick read, honest.) Then, figure out what compost method works best for you. Installing a [backyard compost bin](#) is a good way to start and make some fertilizer to use in your garden. There are tons of other options to pick from, too, including some indoor-friendly versions that use [worms](#) as waste-eating, fertilizer-making helpers.

If you don't feel up to starting your own composting system, or don't have the space, see if your city or region has a composting system you could participate in. You can also look into private composting services in your area. And if nothing's available? Well, sign yourself up to become your local composting advocate.

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#### 10. Cultivate your green thumb

Growing your own vegetables, herbs and fruit is a fun and effective way to reduce your carbon footprint while also prepping for end times. (We're all going to need a skill, right?) Not only are you eating more fresh produce, you're also reducing the amount you need to buy, which cuts down the overall carbon footprint of your diet. It doesn't get more local than fresh parsley or tomatoes from your own backyard, balcony or windowsill.

Don't have garden space? Volunteer at a community vegetable garden to reap the benefits of growing local.



Photo by Breno Assis on Unsplash

### 3.4

## Sustainability starts at home

Your home's size, how it's built and the energy and water you use all contribute to your personal emissions. [Buildings and their construction](#) account for a massive 36 percent of global energy use. And in order to meet Paris Agreement targets, we need to reduce the amount of energy we use in our homes by about 30 percent before 2030.

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The good news? It's totally doable. Here's a few tips for reducing your carbon footprint at your home sweet home.

#### 11. Downsize your digs

No, you don't need to resort to hobbit-style living, but opting to live in a smaller house—or better yet, an apartment or condo—can help reduce your carbon footprint in multiple ways. To start with, people who live in smaller homes use less energy for heating and cooling. But they also tend to buy fewer things and generate less garbage.

#### 12. Join the energy efficiency train

On average, an American home uses 25 percent of its energy on heating, 13 percent on water heating and 11 percent on cooling. The remaining half is spent mainly on appliances.

Consider investing in a [home energy audit](#), which will show you where your weak points are. Proper insulation with sustainable building [materials](#) (like fiberglass and cellulose) can reduce your home's carbon footprint. Installing a cool roof, made of reflective material that redirects light away from your house, is another way to reduce your energy consumption.

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Little things make a difference too, like cleaning or replacing HVAC filters every three months, as a dirty filter will waste energy, making your system work harder than it has to. If you use central heating, blocking drafts and sealing windows will help keep the warmth in during wintertime. And in summer, do what Grandma did and close the blinds to keep the sun's heat out.

### 13. Check your appliances

Energy-efficient appliances will also help reduce your home's carbon footprint. Look for the [Energy Star](#) certification to ensure you're getting a credible product. (You could be eligible for rebates and tax

credits, too. Type your zip code into [Energy Star's website](#) to find programs in your state or local area.)

The number of appliances also makes a difference. Do you really need that second fridge in the garage for your yearly holiday leftover overflow, or could it be discarded (responsibly) to lower your household energy use?

### 14. Little changes, big impact

Installing a programmable or smart thermostat, which will automatically regulate temperatures, is an easy way to reduce your home's carbon emissions and make your home more energy efficient. Also check your settings: Could you leave your house a little warmer in summer and a little cooler in winter to save energy?

Using energy-efficient lighting like LEDs is another quick fix. [LEDs last 25 times longer](#) and use 75 percent less energy than other bulbs. And the quality is way better than it used to be.

And guess what? You can actually buy clean energy. Give your utility company a ring, ask how they source the electricity they supply and see if you can opt in for [“green pricing”](#) to pay just a little bit more to use alternative energy sources.



### THE HEAT FROM YOUR FRIDGE

Fridges and freezers are a triumph of innovation, giving us luxuries like blueberries in the winter and ice cream all year round. But in the process of keeping things chill, they're heating up the planet in an alarming way.

Refrigerants emit greenhouse gases during their entire life cycle, and especially when they're disposed of improperly. They also damage the ozone layer, which helps protect the planet from solar radiation.

Thankfully, updated regulations mean new models are less harmful. If you're getting rid of an old fridge or freezer, be sure to do it responsibly. And if you're in the market for an upgrade, consider buying as small a fridge as possible and picking an Energy Star certified model.



Photo by andré spillborghs on Unsplash

### 15. Make laundry cool again

Your laundry room is a literal hotspot where you can make easy but impactful changes.

Bet you didn't know that approximately [75 percent of the total energy used](#) during a single load of laundry comes from heating the water. Switching to a cold-water wash will get your clothes just as clean and reduce your carbon footprint in the process.

It's v. European, but skipping the dryer will help, too: if every American line-dried their clothes for just half a year, it would save more than 3 percent of the country's total residential CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### 16. Run less water down the drain

Water usage affects your carbon footprint in a couple of ways: not just from heating the water, but from [the infrastructure and energy required](#) to treat it and transport it to your home.

There are many ways to conserve water, like taking showers instead of baths. And the shorter the shower, the better. According to the [EPA](#), a full bathtub requires about 70 gallons (or about 932 cups, if you must know) of water, while a five-minute shower uses a maximum of 25. On top of spending less time in there, use a low-flow shower head to increase efficiency. And when you need new appliances, faucet heads or toilets, look for water-efficient products.

If you're a gardener, installing a rain barrel is a fun and easy way to save water, too. You can use the water collected in your garden instead of taking it from the tap.

### 17. Get rid of your lawn

A garden isn't just a means of reducing the carbon footprint of your food: it can also help make for an energy-efficient home.

Lawns are on the hook for nearly [3 trillion gallons of water annually](#), plus 20 million gallons of gas from mowing and 70 million pounds of pesticides. Replacing your lawn with drought-tolerant plants, or other climate-efficient landscaping, can [reduce your water consumption by up to 75 percent](#)—and save you a ton of effort, so you can enjoy lounging on your patio with an iced coffee on Saturday mornings watching the bees pollinate your flowers while your neighbors sweat it with the yard work.

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The trick for cutting down on both water and labor is to choose [climate-appropriate plants](#) that will thrive with the amount of sun and rain your locale naturally gets. In [drier parts of the country](#), that might mean installing native plants that don't need a ton of water or replacing grassy lawns with rocks and soils that don't need water at all.

Do some Googling to find out what's the most climate-efficient landscaping in your region, or look into hiring an eco-friendly landscaper who's already an expert in this stuff.

### 18. Get your house naturally cool with shady trees

For that full-on house-in-the-country vibe, plant shrubs and trees around your house. On top of looking good, they're nature's insulation.

A deciduous tree on the south or west side of your home, for instance, will help shield it from the sun in the summer, reducing cooling costs, then let in that light and heat in the winter. And a row of evergreens on the north side of your house will help block the icy winter winds blowing down from Canada.

## 3.5 Shop less, save more (carbon)

Everything you buy increases your carbon footprint, from that sweet new vinyl release to that kitchen tool that only does one thing. Buying anything new means that resources had to be extracted and processed, then the product had to be made and packaged, then delivered to you or a store. All of that emits GHGs.

Reducing your product carbon footprint means re-evaluating how much you're buying, who you're buying from, how you shop, how long you use the product for and what you do when you're done with it.

But the most important factor that will reduce your impact is simply to buy less, and buy less often. Downloading a carbon calculator app can help you determine your carbon footprint based on your purchases.

### 19. Buy less (or nothing at all)

Buying less is step numero uno. Everything you purchase has a carbon footprint, so the less you buy, the better. Think in Marie Kondo terms *before* you make a purchase. Does this item spark joy?

Ask yourself if you *really* need it, or if there's someone you can borrow from, or something you



can use instead that's almost as good. You can also look into renting items like tools, small appliances or special-occasion outfits. Don't forget, opting out from shopping is a learned skill that takes practice.

Start with clothing. We have a habit of buying a multitude of outfits and then not using them to their full potential, especially if we're among the many Americans who shop for fun, not because we necessarily need new clothes. According to a study by [Chalmers University of Technology](#), in countries like the United States, garments are rarely put on until they're worn out. This is partly because most "affordable" clothing isn't designed to last. Better to morph into a serious fashionista who makes *investment* purchases.

## 20. Keep your purchases grounded

Just like with food and travel, a product's carbon footprint turns huge the moment it steps on a plane.

By buying from local makers and manufacturers, you often reduce the carbon emissions associated with that purchase. You'll also be bolstering your local economy, and who doesn't love that?

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## 21. Shop online (but be mindful of shipping)

[A study from MIT](#) found that shopping online often has a smaller carbon footprint than buying in person. That's because shipping companies tend to use highly efficient delivery systems. Plus, online shopping could result in there being fewer vehicles on the road than, say, if everyone drove to the mall.

But that doesn't mean online shopping gets you off the hook for emissions. You can make specific choices to keep the footprint as low as possible: slower shipping, bulk ordering and avoiding returns.

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**“ Shipping's carbon footprint gets bigger when you pick faster shipping options, like next-day or express.**

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Shipping's carbon footprint gets bigger when you pick faster shipping options, like next-day or express. When [shippers prioritize speed over efficiency](#), it leads to packages being less consolidated, trucks going out half-empty, more packaging waste and more vehicles on the road to fulfill orders as fast as



Photo by David Ballew on Unsplash

possible. And rushed packages are often [delivered on planes](#), which have a much larger carbon footprint than surface transportation.

That carbon footprint gets bigger again when you make multiple small orders. Try waiting until you have a longer list before ordering. If it's available, choose the option to get everything shipped at once rather than each item as it's ready, so [companies can consolidate your delivery](#).

Also, remember that online returns impact your carbon footprint, too. In totally shocking news, many returned goods are actually thrown out rather than going back into stores, so the pants that just didn't fit right might never get worn, even if you do send them back. Doing detailed research and looking at size charts and product reviews before buying, rather than impulse-shopping, can help.

## 22. Shop vintage, sustainable and high quality

Sifting secondhand isn't everyone's love language, but buying vintage or used helps save both money and the environment—and there is often lots to choose from. It can be especially worthwhile when shopping for kids, who are prone to growing out of their outfits before they've worn them out. Vintage stores and sites like Depop, ThredUp and Etsy offer curated collections if the hunt is too overwhelming.

Before you feel too proud for donating piles of unwanted clothing, note that [secondhand shops are only able to resell](#) up to 20 percent of the clothes they get. The overstock goes to textile recyclers or into landfills, which [release GHGs like CO<sub>2</sub> and methane as the product decomposes](#). Often, unwanted garments from the U.S. end up in other regions like in Africa, where the influx of used clothing has had hugely detrimental effects on local textile businesses due to reduced demand.

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**“ Before you feel too proud for donating piles of unwanted clothing, note that secondhand charities are only able to resell up to 20 percent of the clothes they get.**

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When more people shop vintage, the life cycle of those jeans, dresses and shoes is extended, and fewer new items are purchased. It doesn't hurt that vintage is cool, and there's nothing quite like the feeling of scoring something that you absolutely love (and no one else has)

When you do need to buy something new, shop from companies with a mandate to produce sustainably, and look for products made from sustainable, longer-lasting materials. Natural fibers like wool and linen aren't just durable, they're also biodegradable, unlike synthetics like polyester and spandex. Also think long-term when it comes to color and style; how long is that mustard sweater really going to be on-trend?

Doing research on products that last a lifetime, either from customer reviews or from a forum like [r/buyitforlife](#) on Reddit, can narrow down which

products will really stand the test of time.

The longer you own and use something, the less frequently you'll need to purchase something new. When you buy better-quality, you also have room to resell if you decide that piece no longer serves you.

## 23. Upcycle and repurpose

If you can't resell your gently used items and you're up for a satisfying creative project, upcycle or repurpose them. It takes some extra effort, but it will save your stuff from the landfill and give you good reason not to buy something new.



Photo by Karina Tess on Unsplash

A ripped bed sheet could become a drop cloth for kids' painting projects (or even smocks if you're handy with scissors and a sewing machine), lamps can be made fresh again with an upgraded shade, and obviously you need to keep something useful in that cute bear-shaped honey jar.

Learning to fix things rather than replacing them can also make a big difference. Nowadays, there are plenty of tutorials online to help you do so. Plus, many communities have repair clinics for electronics, appliances, clothes and other goods. Check out websites like [ifixit.com](#) to find tips and tricks on fixing and upcycling your damaged goods.

## 24. Plastic's not so fantastic

From the planet's POV, plastic poses a lot of problems. It lives in the environment for [hundreds, if not thousands](#), of years. Plastics don't decompose; they turn into tiny particles known as microplastics



Photo by Anna Shvets on Pexels

that we (and other animals) ingest. And plastic is more ubiquitous than you might think: consider the lining of a takeaway coffee cup, for instance, or the stretchy fabric in your favorite bathing suit. Both are, pretty much, made of plastic.

Avoiding plastic in favor of alternative materials is one way to make a difference. As always, it's best to buy items that you'll use for a long time or, in the case of packaged food, that can be recycled efficiently. **Above all, use what you have rather than buying new, even in the name of sustainability.**

Skipping disposable and single-use products and picking reusables instead is another way to reduce: think water bottles, reusable shopping bags and travel mugs. It all takes practice, but keep cloth bags on you for when you shop, tote a travel mug to your local coffee spot and call ahead for takeout and let them know you'll be bringing your own containers.

Also, consider whether you need that plastic item at all. The bananas you pick up at the store for your breakfast smoothies already come in nature's packaging. They don't need a produce bag to go into your shopping cart.

Keep an eye out for low- or no-packaging products, like buying the loose lemons instead of the ones in mesh bags. Shopping in the bulk section can reduce your plastic use, too, since there's less, little or no packaging. In some stores, you can even bring your own containers. (Buying in bulk can also help you reduce food waste, as you can buy only what you need, rather than a large container of an ingredient you might not use regularly.)

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**“ Plastic is more ubiquitous than you might think: consider the lining of a takeaway coffee cup, for instance, or the stretchy fabric in your favorite bathing suit.**

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## 25. Digital carbon footprints are a thing

The future is bright, and going digital-only to forgo things like paper printouts or DVDs is a low-waste option. But remember that all that energy that goes into running devices and storing information still contributes to your carbon footprint.

In the U.S., 2 percent of the country's electricity is used to power [data centers](#). Unplugging devices that aren't in use and installing [advanced power strips](#) will reduce the amount of [“vampire loads”](#) (energy that is wasted on electronics not in use) and lower the amount of electricity used overall.

As for data storage, it's easy to forget about digital clutter when it's out of sight, out of mind. But those gigabytes of saved “thanks!” emails and bathroom selfie outtakes [add up to a lot of energy usage](#) and server infrastructure. (One study calculated that if every adult in the U.K. sent one less thank-you email each day, they would save more than 16,000 tCO<sub>2e</sub> per year—the equivalent of 81,152 flights from London to Madrid.) Think of it as extra incentive to just delete everything in your out-of-control inbox.

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**“ Gigabytes of saved “thanks!” emails and bathroom selfie outtakes add up to a lot of energy usage and server infrastructure.**

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## Boost your influencer game

Want to be a trendsetter? Your behavior, and your influence on those around you, can be another way to reduce your carbon footprint.

### 26. Be the change you want to see

Letting others know what you're learning about climate change can help reduce emissions simply because of increased awareness. Discussing the changes you're making with friends and family might inspire them to think more about reducing their own carbon footprints.

Starting or joining a committee at work is another good way to contribute, as is volunteering with local environmental organizations. And to make yourself extra popular, find a couple of super-delicious go-to plant-based recipes to bring to get-togethers and office parties. They won't believe it's vegan!



### The carbon footprints of the future

Perhaps the most controversial among the many ways we can reduce our carbon footprints is [the idea of having fewer children](#). For some, this is accompanied by the question of whether it's ethical at all to [bring a child into a world facing what they perceive as imminent catastrophe](#).

The idea makes a certain amount of sense—more people means more stuff, and more stuff means more GHGs—but alongside being very taboo, the question of whether we should be recommending that people procreate less is subject to a lot of debate.

[Conclusions are murky](#). Predicting the future when there are countless variables is far from an exact science. But it's safe to conclude that while fewer people overall is probably better for the climate

crisis, the most pressing issues are to eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels, and to shift government policy toward a carbon-neutral future.

### Consider carbon offsetting

Unless you can hold your breath for a *really* long time, you're going to create at least some carbon emissions during your time on this planet. So after doing all that's possible to reduce your carbon footprint—still the best thing you can do to lessen your impact on the Earth—the next step is to consider [offsetting your emissions](#).

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**“ Unless you can hold your breath for a *really* long time, you're going to create at least some carbon emissions during your time on this planet.**

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That means financially supporting green projects and initiatives to counteract the carbon emissions you've created. Though reducing your carbon footprint is still the best thing you can do to live more sustainably, offsetting is the only current way to be entirely carbon neutral. (See Chapter 4 for more.)

When we know better, we do better. And knowing where to start can be the biggest challenge, especially with a challenge as big as climate change. But now that you've learned all about reducing your carbon footprint, you've got the power to make a difference. From your breakfast menu to your renovation plans to the way you get to work, you can start living your best sustainable life today.