are made from polycarbonate. These should be fairly easy to identify by their appearance.

Aside from the look of the plastic, the recycling symbol is a good indicator of whether or not the plastic is likely to contain BPA. Plastics are separated into seven categories that are identified by the recycling symbol (three arrows forming a triangle) and the number inside. The symbol is often found on the bottom of the container. Types 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 are BPA-free. Type 3 plastics are PVC and may contain BPA. Type 7 represents all "other" plastics, including polycarbonate, so while not all plastics categorised as type 7 contain BPA, avoid them unless labelled "BPA free".

The best policy is to buy only what you know to be BPA-free, so if in doubt, give it a miss and look for an alternative. A year ago, it was much harder to find baby bottles that were BPA-free, but the actions in the US and Canada have led to a large number of baby-bottle manufacturers switching to BPA-free plastics, so there is no reason to use polycarbonate bottles any more. BPA-free baby products are widely available.

> What makes BPA dangerous is its propensity to leach from the plastic containers into whatever food or drink is inside.

The bottom line

While there is still raging debate within the scientific community over whether or not BPA presents a health risk at low-level exposure, what most manufacturers will concede is that BPA does leach. Unfortunately for consumers, food authorities have a tendency to decide on our behalf what levels of exposure to toxic chemicals are "safe". Despite denials from chemical suppliers and plastics manufacturers, there is an increasing number of independent studies that suggest there is no "safe" level of BPA for humans, in particular for babies and children.

With that in mind, it's up to parents to choose whether or not they are prepared to take the chance on the health effects and vote with their wallets. Given the number of BPA-free products that are now available, it's easy to avoid unnecessary risk. The sweeping changes already seen in the baby products industry have been the result of consumer pressure rather than government regulation. If consumers continue to exert pressure on manufacturers, BPA in any kind of food containers will become a thing of the past.

Nicola Mellare is a freelance journalist and a mother.

Plastics at a glance

- Polycarbonate is hard and glass-like. It is usually clear but can be coloured. If the plastic is honey-coloured, it is likely to be BPA free.
- Look for recycling numbers 3 & 7 or the letters PC and avoid them. Numbers 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 are OK.
- If the plastic is marked PP it is polypropylene and does not contain BPA.
- Many companies are realising that "BPA-free" is a marketing tool and are labelling their products as BPA-free.
- For reuseable drink bottles, choose stainless steel or aluminium.
- Avoid clingwrap and resealable sandwich bags — opt instead for paper or aluminum foil (which can be reused several times.
- Avoid canned food wherever possible unless you know the can lining is BPA-free.

Recycle symbol	Plastic	Common uses	Problem
1	PET or PETE (polyethylene terephthalate)	Single-use bottled beverages including water and soft drinks, peanut butter container, squeezable bottles	No known risk if used as intended — once. Some concern over possible leaching with extended use.
2	HDPE (high-density polyethylene)	Milk and juice containers, yoghurt cartons, supplement bottles, margarine tubs	No known risk.
3	PVC (polyvinyl chloride)	Clear food packaging, eg refillable rice container, lunchboxes and kids' backpacks	Increasing concern over potential leaching of phthalates (chemicals linked to child development problems). Avoid.
4	LDPE (low-density polyethylene)	Bread bags, frozen-food bags, squeezable bottles, microwavable clingwrap	No known risk.
5	PP (polypropylene)	Dishwasher- and microwave-safe containers, takeaway containers, ready-to-eat fruit containers, kids' cups, sauce bottles, yoghurt cartons, margarine tubs	High melting point means safe for hot food and can go in the dishwasher. No known risk.
6	PS (polystyrene)	Meat trays, cups and plates, Styrofoam cups	Concern over leaching of chemicals such as styrene, a possible carcinogen, particularly on long storage (after a year) and when used for hot liquids or foods. Avoid.
7	Other Anything else can be a combination of resins; includes PC (polycarbonate)	Most baby bottles (unless labelled BPA-free), sippy cups, children's hard plastic plates and bowls	PC contains bisphenol-A (BPA) that has been shown to leach into contents. While not all plastics with number 7 contain BPA, often you won't know. Avoid unless labelled BPA-free.