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Coronavirus: Waste segregation at source essential amid COVID-19 crisis to break chain of transmission, say experts

Mrityunjay Bose , DHNS, Mumbai, MAR 28 2020, 07:33 IST UPDATED: MAR 28 2020, 07:41 IST



The need for ensuring segregation of waste at source is unprecedented amid the coronavirus outbreak. Many leading environmentalists, scientists and medical doctors in India feel that this habit will not only reduce dumping of waste in landfills and oceans but will also play a crucial role in containing COVID-19.

The experts also urged the government to supply safety kits which contain gloves, mask, hand wash/sanitiser bottles to all municipal workers and ragpickers, since they manually handle household waste regularly.

Common citizens are advised to dispose of their garbage in three categories – Biomedical waste (tissues, masks, gloves, sanitizer bottles), recyclables (metal cans, all size PET/HDPE plastic bottles and other heavy plastic objects, cardboards) and compostable (food and other organic waste).

"The society's perception and practice of indiscriminate disposal of various items can be a potential source of infection of COVID-19 to municipal workers. The communities need to dispose of their used napkins, tissues, empty sanitizer bottles in a separate bag, to ensure the safety of municipal workers and ragpickers. It will also ensure that the cycle of garbage collection and plastic recycling don't get affected. The government should also provide safety kits to municipal workers urgently and educate them on how to handle household waste during the outbreak, to help in halting the chain of transmission," **said Dr. Deepak**

Saxena, Medical Expert on Public Health and Professor, Indian Institute of Public Health.

"The leading scientists and organizations are anticipating that close to 60% of the population would be infected hence the widespread panic is natural, but we can adopt some safety measures to curtail the spread. In addition to following the guidelines issued by leading health bodies, we must also dispose of our gloves, masks, sanitizer bottles, tissue papers responsibly so these items are collected and treated/recycled to contain the infection. While, the recycling ecosystem doesn't exist for gloves/masks but small sanitizer bottles which is PET plastic, is one of the highest recycled plastic globally and must be disposed properly to ensure recycling. Infection can come from anywhere, reusable items such as cups, glasses should be avoided at restaurants/public places and single-use plastics which are highly recycled in India should be preferred for the time being," said professor GD Yadav, Retired Vice-Chancellor of Institute of Chemical Technology(ICT).

"There should be no handling of garbage with bare hands. Municipal workers, waste pickers need gloves. The general public should also ensure that they segregate waste at source, reducing the need for municipal workers to touch and separate waste manually, which would expose them to infections. Scientifically, gloves/masks should be incinerated post usages but since it can't be practiced at every household hence there should be a different garbage bag to dispose of house-hold biomedical waste such as used tissues, gloves etc. especially during the current outbreak. Waste segregation at source should also be practiced generally to ensure that our waste is not ending up in landfills/oceans, in place of recycling facilities and composters," said Dr V Ramasubramanian – Infectious Diseases Expert, Apollo Hospitals.

"The scientific/medical information about COVID-19 must be mass-circulated to make informed decisions to contain the outbreak. Plastics are truly the scientific marvels, which have increased the efficiency and hygiene of medicine/medical equipment's from the surgery suite to the doctor's office. Imagine if we were still dependent on metal gas masks, woollen gloves and glass bottles to carry our sanitizers. Plastics like PET, HDPE have made the gigantic task of providing essential supplies during natural catastrophes and containing disease outbreaks easier, since it is light weight, non-breakable, inexpensive, easy to carry and provides high levels of safety. The recycling process is really important for the environment, and we shouldn't suddenly forsake that because of all the fear around this particular issue," said Professor Arun Sawant, Former – Vice Chancellor – Mumbai University and Rajasthan University and Director - India, Waste to Energy Research and Technology Council, President, Society for Clean environment (SOCLEEN).

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