

# Cigarettes Butt Litter—Questions and Answers

Source: [Clean Virginia Waterways](#)

## 1. Why are people careless in discarding cigarette butts but not other forms of trash?

While most Americans are intolerant of most forms of litter, many people don't seem to see cigarette filters as litter. Smokers incorrectly believe that cigarette filters are made of biodegradable cotton. In fact, cigarette filters are made of plastic cellulose acetate, and take many years to decompose.

Some smokers believe that one little cigarette butt won't cause any harm, but in fact the poisons in cigarette butts kill small animals. In the US, we are tossing more than 175 million pounds of cigarette butts out every year. Additionally, a lit butt can cause fires and have other negative impacts on the environment and human health. (For example, a cigarette butt was the possible cause of an 11,000 acre fire in San Diego in January 2001.)

## 1. What should be done to prevent the littering of cigarette butts?

Studies show that more ashtrays will only help a little. The only way we will prevent this form of litter is through **changing people's behavior through education**, peer pressure or enforcement of anti-litter laws. If smokers and nonsmokers knew that cigarette butts contain toxins, and they cost us millions of dollars in fire-fighting and cleanup, we as a society would not tolerate this littering behavior. [Click here for some litter prevention ideas](#) that have been tried. . [Click here for newspaper articles](#) about how communities are trying to reduce cigarette litter.

## 2. What organizations are doing the most to prevent cigarette litter?

Many organizations, companies and individuals are trying to prevent cigarette litter. **The Ocean Conservancy** has gathered statistics about cigarette filter litter as volunteers complete "Marine Debris Data Cards" during the International Coastal Cleanup. It is from this enormous database that we know that cigarette filters are the most frequently littered item in the U.S. and the world. Many **beach communities** have worked with The Ocean Conservancy to develop litter prevention campaigns (including cigarette butts), and many **universities, parks and businesses** have anti-litter efforts. In 2002, **Keep America Beautiful** launched a campaign devoted to cigarette litter. After studying the success of various educational efforts, this program, funded by Philip Morris, USA, plans to have a nation wide presence. Many **local Keep America Beautiful affiliates** are working hard on a local level to address cigarette litter. Several websites, including **cigarettelitter.org**, are trying to develop nationwide educational efforts on this issue. The research on the toxic properties of cigarette butts (done by **Clean Virginia Waterways**) has also been widely read and quoted—CVW gets emails and calls from reporters around the world nearly every week. Also, many states, including Texas, Arizona and California, have organizations that have addressed this litter issue.

### 3. Which organizations are most responsible for cigarette litter?

Individual people are responsible for smoking-related litter. But just as beverage and fast-food companies have taken steps to provide anti-litter education to their customers, so could the tobacco manufacturers increase their commitment to educating the buyers of their products. Industry involvement is absolutely essential in educating smokers and solving this litter problem. It would cost nothing for cigarette packages to have an anti-litter message like "Cigarette butts are litter too—Please dispose properly." Manufacturers could also use their web sites and ads to urge smokers not to litter. Some tobacco companies, such as **Philip Morris, USA**, have started to address smoking-related litter on their website and through direct-mail pieces to their customers. **Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation** also has a web page that discusses cigarette litter. CVW encourages other companies to educate their customers too.

Also, wouldn't it be nice to see **Hollywood** provide some good examples of smokers doing the right thing!

### 4. What is the most important message to get across to people about littering cigarette butts?

**Cigarette butts are litter too.** Littering is wrong and it is illegal. Litter harms people, animals, the places animals live, and our economy. All of society has to pay the price of the people who litter.

### 5. What are the most common misconceptions about cigarette butts?

Too many people believe that cigarette butts are too small to be litter, or that they are cotton, and will quickly disappear.

### 6. Is the problem getting better or worse?

Some studies indicated that since we have enacted indoor smoking bans, more cigarette butts are being tossed directly into the environment, instead of finding their way into landfills with other forms of solid waste. [Click here for newspaper articles](#) about how communities find cigarette litter increases when smoking is banned inside. [Click here for information about workplace smoking bans](#), and how they impact cigarette litter in the environment.

### 7. Shouldn't we ban smoking in some areas?

This is a litter issue, not a smoking issue! Fast-food related litter (food wrappers, straws, plastic forks, bottles, cups, cans, napkins, etc.) comprise the largest group of litter, but banning fast-food restaurants and convenience stores is not the answer. We must change the behavior of people who litter. EDUCATION is the answer. [Click here for newspaper articles](#) about how some communities are banning smoking in public areas (including parks and beaches) in order to decrease cigarette litter.

## Read all about cigarette butt litter!

[Click here to read an article](#) that was published in the August 2000 issue of the American Littoral Society journal, *The Underwater Naturalist*. This article, by CVW's Executive Director Kathleen M. Register, includes background data, such as the fact that 2.1 billion pounds of cigarette filters were discarded worldwide in 1998, along with results of her research showing that leached chemicals from cigarette filters are deadly to the water flea *Daphnia magna*, a small crustacean at the lower end of, but important to the aquatic food chain.

[Return to Cigarette Butt Litter Home Page](#)

[Return to Clean Virginia Waterways](#)

Compiled by Clean Virginia Waterways, Longwood University, Farmville, VA 23909  
434-395-2602 Fax: 434-395-2825 Email: [cleanva@longwood.edu](mailto:cleanva@longwood.edu)

### Students and Teachers:

Are you interested in doing a science fair project on cigarette litter?

[Click here for ideas and information.](#)