

What is a carbon footprint?

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You can't control everything, but being conscious of your carbon footprint helps.

A carbon footprint is the amount of greenhouse gases—primarily carbon dioxide—released into the atmosphere by a particular human activity. A carbon footprint can be a broad measure or be applied to the actions of an individual, a family, an event, an organization, or even an entire nation. It is usually measured as tons of CO₂ emitted per year, a number that can be supplemented by tons of CO₂-equivalent gases, including methane, nitrous oxide, and other greenhouse gases.

How is a carbon footprint calculated?

When calculating a carbon footprint, a lot of factors are taken into consideration. For example, driving to the grocery store burns a certain amount of fuel, and fossil fuels are the primary sources of greenhouse gases. But that grocery store is powered by electricity, and its employees probably drove to work, so the store has its own carbon footprint. In addition, the products that the store sells were all shipped there, so that must also be factored into the total carbon footprint. Beyond that, the fruits, vegetables, and meats that the store sells were all grown or raised on farms, a process that produces methane, which has a greenhouse effect 25 times greater than CO₂. All of those elements must be combined to understand the full carbon footprint of a given activity.

How can I reduce my carbon footprint?

Methods of reducing your carbon footprint include driving more-efficient vehicles (or making sure that your current vehicles are properly maintained), taking public transportation, using energy-efficient appliances, insulating your home to reduce heating and air conditioning costs, consuming food that doesn't require as much transportation, and eating less meat, which has a higher carbon footprint than fruits and vegetables. Individuals and companies can also offset some of their CO₂ emissions by purchasing carbon offset credits, the money from which can go into projects such as planting trees or investing in renewable energy. Carbon offsets are a form of trade. When you buy an offset, you fund projects that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The projects might restore forests, update power plants and factories or increase the energy efficiency of buildings and transportation. Carbon offsets let you pay to reduce the global GHG total instead of making radical or impossible reductions of your own. GHG emissions mix quickly with the air and, unlike other pollutants, spread around the entire planet. Because of this, it doesn't really matter where GHG reductions take place if fewer emissions enter the atmosphere. Carbon offsets are voluntary. People and businesses buy them to reduce their carbon footprints or build up their green image.