

# Mother Nature Recycles!

A microscopic organism is a very, very tiny living thing, like a bacterium, virus, or fungus, that you can only see by using a microscope. Microorganisms have a very important job in nature—they are Mother Nature’s recycling team.

When something dies in the forest, billions of microorganisms, known as decomposers, work as a team to break it down. They are part of what is known as “the food chain”, which means that in nature, everything eats something else. This applies to both animals and plants. If you have seen the movie *The Lion King* then you may remember that another word for “the food chain” is “the circle of life”.

For example, when a tree falls in the forest, a crew of decomposers shows up to help break it down. First come the fungi. You are probably more familiar with the word “mushroom”, though not every fungus is a mushroom. Mold is also a fungus. Different kinds of molds appear on and spread over the tree, eventually breaking it down. Bacteria works the second shift. There are many different kinds of bacteria, and different kinds of bacteria eat different nutrients in the tree. This process takes a very long time (it can take years), but eventually the decomposed tree becomes part of the soil on the forest floor. That soil still contains all of the nutrients that were in the fallen tree, but now these nutrients are available to help new plants to grow. This is Mother Nature’s way of recycling!



- The word *microscopic* means:
  - break down
  - very, very tiny
  - recycling
- The “food chain” is Mother Nature’s way of:
  - recycling
  - expanding
  - cleaning up
- Which word below means to “break something down”?
  - fungi
  - recycling
  - decompose
- Fungi* is sometimes a synonym for:
  - bacteria
  - decompose
  - mushroom

## SAFETY TIP!

There are many different kinds of fungi—mushrooms—but some of them are very, very poisonous. NEVER pick a mushroom from the ground and eat it. You could get very sick, or even die!

