

Rethink What You Recycle

Be part of the solution—not the problem—with our quick-reference recycling guide By Perry Santanachote

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Done right, recycling conserves natural resources including water and trees, saves energy, reduces greenhouse gases and other pollution, and even creates jobs.

But if you've been doom-scrolling, you've probably read about various recycling fails across the globe, including reports that only about 10 percent of plastic is recycled (most of it isn't designed to be) and that some U.S. recycling programs shut down after China stopped buying our recyclable trash because it was too . . . trashy.

But there is one nugget of grace in that pile of garbage. Domestic demand for recycled materials is up, largely due to pandemic-related increases of the cardboard boxes shipped to our homes, plastic for takeout food containers, and face masks and other protective gear.

Now, America's recycling industry is ramping up to supply that demand.

"Investments are being made in the U.S. for the first time in a long time for the processing of recyclables," says Pete Keller, vice president of recycling and sustainability at Republic Services, one of the largest waste disposal companies in the U.S. "It's a function of the marketplace fixing itself."

MORE ON RECYCLING

[What's Gone Wrong With Plastic Recycling](#)

Yes, You Can Recycle That. Here's How.

How to Recycle Old Electronics

Yes, You Need to Recycle Your Old Batteries

The Ultimate Guide to Recycling K-Cups, Nespresso Capsules,
and Other Coffee Pods

Though a willingness to recycle is a big step in the right direction, Keller says it can backfire if consumers don't understand what can—and cannot—be recycled. Look in your blue recycling bin. Odds are that one out of five things shouldn't be in there.

“If there's doubt whether something can be recycled, people will toss it into the bin and hope the facility will sort it out,” Keller says. “This can hurt people in the sorting facility, break machines, cause fires, and contaminate the end product so that it can't be sold.”

What can't be sold ends up in the landfill. And we're not just talking about the errant items—the entire bale gets tossed out.

Common offenders include flexible plastics like grocery bags and food wrappers, which the sorting machines can accidentally direct into the paper zone, where they can foul up the works and make the paper unusable.

Food, whether soaked into your pizza box or clinging to the inside of a peanut butter jar, can also make recyclables unfit for processing. Remember that recycling is a marketplace, like eBay or Etsy, and a dirty or diluted product is going to be worth a lot less, if it sells at all.

Of course, recycling alone won't solve all of our environmental challenges. But along with reducing and reusing what we consume, it moves us toward a greener future. Print out and post this recycling guide near your waste bins. That way you'll

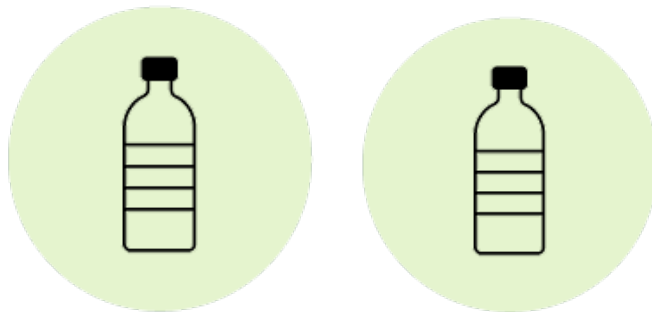
always know what to throw away and what can be a part of the solution of recycling, rather than part of the problem.

Do Your Part, Recycle Smart Recycling the wrong materials can be worse than not recycling at all. Check with your local sanitation department to learn what can and cannot be recycled in your area (many provide printable guides). For more general best practices, follow our chart.

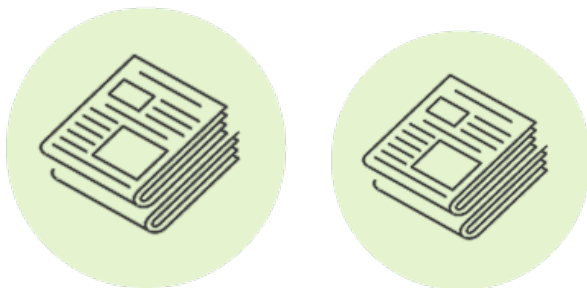
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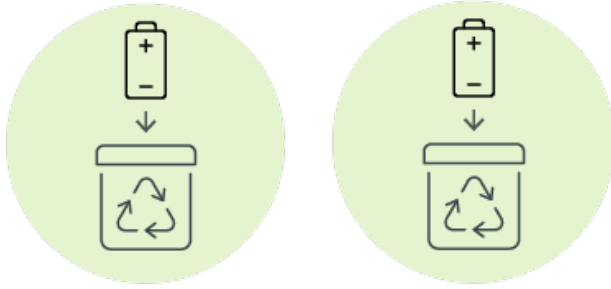
Empty and rinse containers.



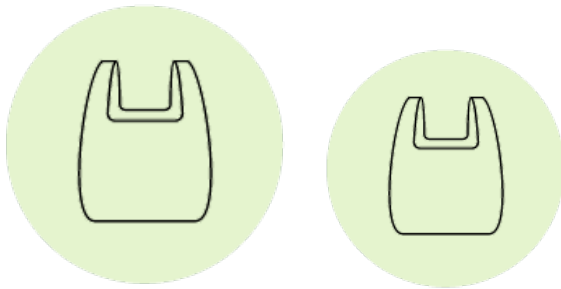
Leave on lids (as long as they're accepted).



Keep cardboard and paper dry and reasonably clean.



Take batteries to a drop-off location (go to call2recycle.org).

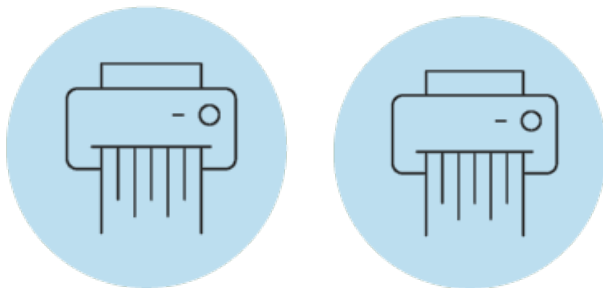


Take plastic bags to a drop-off location (go to plasticfilmrecycling.org).

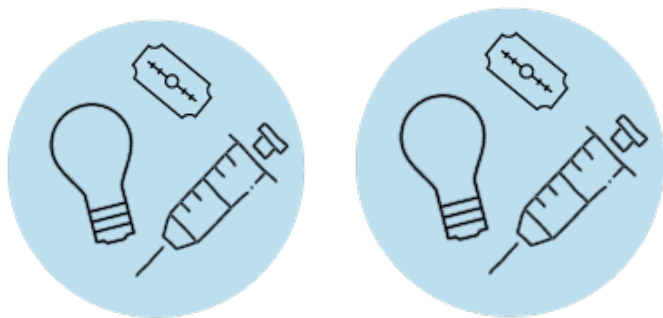
NEVER . . .



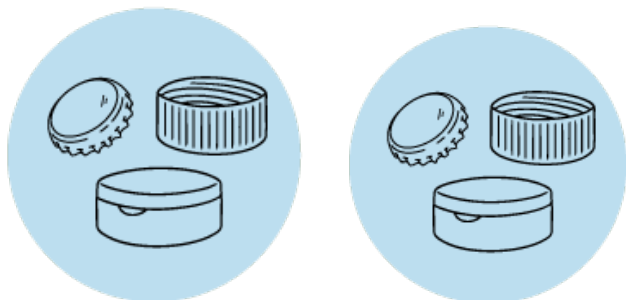
Bag recyclables.



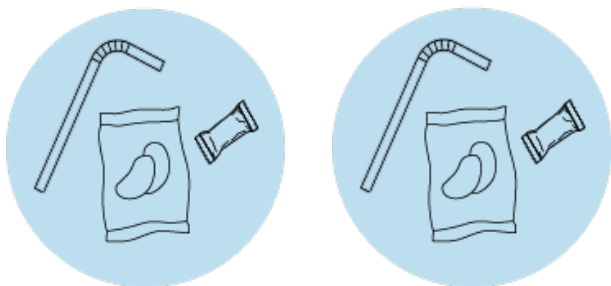
Shred paper.



Recycle sharp objects.



Recycle loose lids or bottle caps.



Recycle straws or flexible food packaging.

Visit Earth911 or call 1-800-CLEANUP for info on how to dispose of just about any material.