

What is Recycling Contamination?

Recycling contamination happens when incorrect items/materials are put into the system or when the right items/materials are prepared the wrong way (i.e., food residue in containers, recyclables in plastic bags, etc.).

Types of Recycling Contamination

Contaminants turn your recycling into nothing more than trash. Some contaminants are worse than others and most are easily avoidable.

Plastic Bags - Plastic bags and items made from plastic material (i.e., shrink wrap, bubble wrap, Ziploc bags, newspaper bags, trash bags, etc.) are contaminators. Keep them out of recycling containers to save the sorters at your local recycling facility a huge amount of extra removal work while also saving their machines the hassle of getting clogged.

Food Waste - Recyclable items quickly become garbage when they carry the remnants of the food that they once held. Some great examples of food waste contamination can be found in paperboard take-home boxes full of food and the recyclable jar/can that hasn't been emptied or rinsed out.

Loose Shredded Paper - The most valuable trait of recyclable paper is its long paper fiber. This is because long fibers can stand up to multiple recycling cycles. While shredded-paper is not considered a contaminant as a whole, loose shredded paper can cause many recycling issues. When shredded-paper is mixed in with non-shredded paper, it is difficult to recover for recycling at a materials recovery facility (MRF). The problem is with the small pieces. To fix this, people who want to recycle their shredded paper can simply keep it in a paper bag and place in the recycling cart.

Polystyrene or Styrofoam - Polystyrene foam is 95% air so it is not cost-effective to store or ship. It is often contaminated with food or drink, and it is difficult to clean because it is so porous. Remember that recycling uses energy for transport and processing. There is no point in recycling if more energy is used than saved. Avoid buying and using items made from polystyrene or reuse it when possible.

Hazardous Waste - Household hazardous wastes (HHW) are leftover or unused portions of chemicals and products used to clean and maintain your home. These materials are often labeled CAUTION, WARNING, DANGER, POISON, TOXIC, FLAMMABLE, or CORROSIVE (i.e. paint, automotive fluids, batteries, compact fluorescent lights (CFL's) or pesticides). It is illegal to dispose of HHW in the garbage (including recycling and yard waste carts), sewers or storms drains. HHW is to be taken to a household hazardous waste collection facility.

E-Waste - Electronic waste is waste from electronics, including discarded mobile phones, refrigerators, electronic office equipment, computers, television sets and electronic entertainment devices. E-waste can contain toxic materials like mercury, lead, beryllium, brominated flame retardants (BFRs) and Cadmium. Keep e-waste out of the recycling cart to prevent recycling workers from handling hazardous chemicals. Take e-waste to designated collection sites.

Bio-Hazardous Waste - Anything that has any human fluid on it like syringes, needles, diapers, and any other sanitary product are not recyclable and can be potentially dangerous to handle.

Clothing/Bedding/Toys - Items like bedding, clothing, towels, toys or shoes can be reusable but are not recyclable. Contact a local charity and donate item(s) that still have use left in them.

Other – Carpet, rugs, furniture, metal pipes, plumbing fixtures, tires, hoses, tarps, pool covers or wood do not go into the recycling carts. If they are able to fit into the garbage cart with the lid closed they can be disposed of there. If not, they can be taken to a waste service provider (dump).

Why Recycling Contamination Matters

Let's take a closer look at the harm contaminants can do.

Recycling Becomes Impossible

When the occurrence of contaminants in a load of recycling becomes too great, the items will be sent to the landfill even though some of them are viable for recycling. This happens because recycling is a business. If extra costs add up simply to separate out the contamination, it is likely that a use for that money will be found elsewhere.

Recycling Machinery Maintenance

Plastic bags, as mentioned, can wrap around the shafts and axles of a sorting machine and endanger the sorters who have to remove them. When the machine breaks and the sorters have to dig them out, it is time and energy wasted.

Unsafe Work Environments for Those Sorting Your Stuff

When improper, non-recyclable items contaminate the sorting bins, recycling workers can be exposed to hazardous waste, vector-borne diseases (living organisms that can transmit infectious diseases between humans or from animals to humans), and other physically damaging items.

Devaluation

The paper, cardboard, plastic, and metal commodities in your recycling have value aside from benefitting the planet. If a contaminant is present, the quality of the recyclable is reduced or eliminated. This gives recycling less market value, and the local recycling program may suffer as a result. Ultimately, this could result in an increased cost of service.

Damaged Recycling Relationship

When you combine the above-mentioned issues, a recycling facility can begin to get weary. When this happens, it is not uncommon for these facilities to refuse service to repeat offenders. That means that all the otherwise good recycling that could be used will end up in the landfill.

Recycling Contamination Prevention

1. Communicate
The best way to solve most problems is through communication, and that should include community, classmates and family.
2. Do Your Part
Keep the blue cart contaminant free by putting only accepted recyclables in it.
2. Keep It Clean
Remember there are hardworking people sorting the items you are recycling. Without them, these items would just be trash. For example, before you recycle that plastic to-go container with food remnants, think of the person that will have to handle that messy container in a week. Not only is it gross, it's not ideal as a recyclable material. Give containers a quick scrape to ensure you've removed any excess food.