

**THE HOME YOU OWN**

# These everyday items endanger the environment. Here's how to handle them.

How to safely dispose of paint, batteries, light bulbs and other potentially risky products cluttering up your cabinets.

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**UPDATED**

This story has been updated with additional information about paint recycling.

They light our rooms, color our walls, clean our surfaces and power our electronics. Products that can be potentially hazardous to humans and animals are left in basements, stored under sinks and cloistered in closets — often because people simply don't know how to get rid of them.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, it's imperative to keep products that contain harmful chemicals or unsafe metals out of the municipal waste stream, where they can endanger the community and the environment. For many items, proper disposal is as easy as dropping them off at your city or county transfer station. If that's not convenient, keep in mind that batteries and lightbulbs can often be recycled at stores that sell them. [Earth911](#) is a comprehensive resource for finding a place to recycle more than 350 materials at more than 100,000 locations in North America.

EPA environmental protection specialist Kathy Lett stresses that people also can make less-toxic purchases from the start. “Consumers can minimize waste on the front end,” she says, pointing to the EPA’s Safer Choice labeling program, which identifies eco-friendlier cleaning and other household products from companies including Seventh Generation and ECOS. But if you already have a stockpile of potentially risky items cluttering your cabinets, here’s how to dispose of them the right way.

## 1 Lightbulbs

We dig compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) — which come in many shapes but are often spiraled — because they’re energy efficient. But CFLs contain small amounts of mercury, which is toxic to humans and pets and can be released into the environment when the bulbs break. (Same goes for tube-shaped fluorescent bulbs.) In short, the EPA doesn’t want these to end up in the landfill, so keep them out of your trash.

Home Depot, Lowe’s and Ikea accept CFLs, which are then recycled. Lowe’s also accepts traditional fluorescent bulbs, and Ikea accepts LEDs, which contain recyclable microchips and electrical components. These bulbs also can be taken to your local transfer station; check first to see what is accepted where you live.

The EPA recommends holding on to the packaging when you screw in a new bulb so you know when it burns out whether it contains mercury. As for older-style incandescent bulbs, you can toss those into your regular household trash, guilt-free.

## 2 Cleaners, paint and other liquids

Take a look at the liquids in your house: cleaning sprays, degreasers, rust removers, disinfectants, bug sprays, toilet bowl cleaners, stain removers and more. If you see a warning on the outside that says the contents are toxic, flammable or need to be handled with care or kept away from children, they’re not meant for our wastewater system. That means don’t pour them down any drains (including storm-water drains) or flush them down the toilet. Same goes for paint, paint thinner, fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides — even if they aren’t liquid.

“Hazardous household materials can pollute local streams and water bodies, contaminate groundwater and harm fish and wildlife, and also our pets,” says American Rivers spokeswoman Amy Souers Kober. “Disposing of these substances properly is so important to protecting our own health, our drinking water and the health of our environment.”

To get rid of these products safely, you’ll have to take them to your local transfer station, searchable at [Earth911](#). (You can also search there for places to drop off old motor oil.) Or look for a local paint recycling program, such as [PaintCare](#), which operates in 10 states and D.C. The nonprofit accepts paint, primer, shellac and varnish at [drop-off sites](#), then sends them to be recycled — often back into paint.

## 3 Batteries

The “freedom to go unplugged” comes with the responsibility to do the right thing with batteries, says Linda Gabor, executive vice president of external relations for [Call2Recycle](#), a consumer battery recycling program with thousands of collection sites nationwide. “It might take an extra step, but at the end of the day, we want batteries to stay out of the trash and home recycling, where they can start fires.”

Batteries also contain valuable materials that should be conserved, according to the EPA. Call2Recycle is funded by more than 200 manufactures, including Dyson, Samsung and LG, to ensure that batteries are collected at retail sites and shipped, sorted and recycled, down to their plastic casing.

When storing and transporting your batteries, keep them in a cool place, in a nonmetal container. Place a bit of electrical or duct tape over the electrical contacts or place them in individual bags to prevent fires when the batteries are jostled, advises the EPA. (This is most important with lithium or lithium-ion batteries.) If a battery looks damaged — showing swelling, corrosion or other defects — it is more likely to be dangerous. For guidance on how to handle a damaged battery, contact Call2Recycle’s customer service line at 877-723-1297.

Though there are various ways to safely dispose of different types of batteries, Gabor stresses that Call2Recycle aims to simplify the process: “We really don’t want consumers to feel like they have to be battery sorters. Leave all of that sorting to us.”

Nonetheless, here’s a quick primer on how to handle a few common types.

- **Single-use and rechargeable batteries.** For most of these batteries, you can search

Call2Recycle to find a retailer that accepts them for recycling — Home Depot and Lowe’s accept rechargeable batteries — or check with your hazardous waste center. Some rechargeable batteries aren’t removable from their devices; in that case, bring the entire device to the drop-off location. Single-use alkaline batteries used to contain mercury, but today they’re safe to throw in your household trash.

- **E-bike batteries.** These are accepted at many bike stores. Search [Call2Recycle](#), which has partnered with more than 1,600 retail locations for drop-offs.
- **Vehicle batteries.** These batteries, including those that power cars, motorcycles, boats and golf carts, are traditionally lead-acid, which the EPA reports may contain up to 18 pounds of lead and about one gallon of corrosive lead-contaminated sulfuric acid. According to [Recycle Nation](#), these materials can be toxic to humans and pets and will poison groundwater if they leak from their plastic cases, so they’re banned from landfills and incinerators in every state. Handle these batteries carefully, and return them to the stores where you bought them or drop them off at a transfer station. If you have a [plug-in hybrid or electric vehicle](#), refer to the manufacturer’s instructions or contact the dealership. None of these batteries should end up in the trash or curbside recycling.

## 4 A few surprises

According to the EPA, [old-style thermostats](#) (the kind with a lever to adjust the temperature) have a quantity of mercury inside equal to the amount in more than 100 CFL lightbulbs. Same goes for glass thermometers in which you can see the mercury, barometers and some antique pendulum clocks. If you’re upgrading to digital models, drop the old ones at your local transfer station or search for a collection spot at [Earth911](#).

Finally, guess what seemingly benign, ubiquitous item is too dangerous for household trash? Hand sanitizer. The Food and Drug Administration regulates alcohol-based hand sanitizers, which are flammable, as an over-the-counter drug and considers them hazardous waste when disposed of. The EPA encourages people to take unused hand sanitizer to [hazardous waste collection drop-off locations](#).

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