

AVOID CONTAMINATION



Recycling contamination – when non-recyclable material is put into the recycling bin – is a persistent issue for material recovery facilities (MRFs). Contaminants can be toxic and/or difficult to recycle, so when they are mixed in with recyclables, it results in problems for the MRF, the employees, and you. By decreasing recycling contamination, a MRF can be more efficient and recycle higher quality material to sell to manufacturers, driving prices down and making products made from recycled materials more customary in stores and less expensive to buy.



Three Ways Contamination Disrupts a MRF:

1. **Damage to equipment.** When flimsy materials (plastic bags) enter the MRF, they get caught in the machinery, causing all equipment to shut down while employees untangle the material and repair any resulting damages. This halts material processing, losing money for both the MRF and your community.
2. **Quality loss of material.** This occurs when the contaminant gets through to the individual material processing. For instance, when paper is recycled it is washed to remove ink, staples, and glue. But if a greasy pizza box enters the stream, the grease cannot be separated from the paper mixture, and the entire batch is either sold at a lower cost than usual or is landfilled.
3. **Unsafe work conditions for employees.** Contaminants may also pose a danger to MRF employees with toxic or hazardous material and medical waste. Medical waste often includes used needles that can poke an employee removing them from the recyclable material. Numerous infections and diseases are transferred by needles, so proper disposal of medical waste and sharps is of utmost importance for the safety of MRF employees.





Common contaminants:

- Plastic bags
- Shredded paper
- Food, liquids, grease
- Household hazardous waste (HHW)
- Electronics and batteries
- Medical waste
- Soda/beer cartons
- Diaper

While recycling programs differ from place to place, most will not accept these items in the recycling collection. Contact your county for disposal options for HHW, electronics, batteries, and medical waste.

How to Minimize Contamination:

1. Proper preparation for recyclables
 - a. Empty and rinse contents of food and beverage bottles and containers
 - b. Flatten cardboard and paperboard
2. Know what materials are accepted
 - a. Almost every recycling program has different rules for what materials they accept. Make sure you know what is and is not accepted in your recycling program.
3. Don't wish-cycle
 - a. This refers to putting an item in the recycling with the hope that it will get where it needs to go, regardless if it's recyclable or not. Always be sure that what you put in the recycling bin is recyclable in your recycling program.
 - b. Wish-cycling wastes time, money, and creates more waste by contaminating recyclable material.
4. Non-curbside materials
 - a. HHW, lightbulbs, batteries, car seats, mattresses, paint, appliances DO NOT go into your trash or recycling containers. Contact your county for disposal options.
5. Think about the MRF employees
 - a. MRF employees hand-sort the material to remove problem materials, so do not put things like needles and diapers in the recycling. They are NOT recyclable and can cause serious injury to employees

