

Change by degrees Recycling

Bin sins: common recycling mistakes and how to avoid them

With so many bins, and ever more complex packaging, recycling in Australia can be complicated and confusing. Here's what not to do

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📷 The system can fail when there are too many incorrect or non-recyclable items in the yellow bin.
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Australians consider themselves good recyclers. But while more than 90% say recycling is important, many admit to doing it wrong.

About half have engaged in well intentioned “wish-cycling” at some point, according to Cleanaway’s [recycling behaviours survey](#), such as popping soft plastics in the recycling bin and hoping for the best.

That’s just one of the common mistakes that can contaminate an entire recycling batch, risking the whole lot being sent to landfill.

When mistakes add up

Recycling plants receive, sort and prepare mixed materials such as metal tins, plastic containers, paper and cardboard – separating high-quality recyclables from unsuitable products.

But the system can fail when there’s too much or too many incorrect or non-recyclable items in the yellow bin.

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“There certainly is a threshold for a waste management company to say ‘there’s too much in this’,” says Amelia Leavesley, an urban sustainability researcher at Melbourne Business School.

Take, for instance, one stray, unopened yoghurt container misplaced in the yellow bin.

“That yoghurt container explodes! Everything’s covered in this sticky white stuff, it’s probably gone mouldy by this point,” she says.

As contamination builds up, so too do the chances that a waste management company will decide to send the load to landfill, and the bill to council.

“Sometimes it’s so contaminated it just gets sent to landfill. The time and energy and effort to clean these individual products ... is not worth it for the recycler,” says Leavesley.

There are some persistent problem items that wind up on recycling conveyer belts. Here’s a quick rundown of what usually goes where.

Plastic bags and soft plastics: back to the supermarket

Soft plastics (ones you can scrunch into a ball), including plastic bags, are one of the biggest contamination culprits in kerbside recycling.

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Plastic bags should never be placed in a yellow bin, or used to bundle up containers for recycling.

While the collapse of Redcycle in 2022 meant [a well known drop-off point was lost](#), new schemes are emerging, such as ones operated by [Soft Plastic Stewardship Australia](#) with local governments and at Woolworths supermarkets, and through [Curby's](#) kerbside program.

Where no local program or drop-off point is available, the best solution is to put plastic bags and wrappers in your red bin.

Probably red: coffee cups and pods, milk and juice cartons

Papery takeaway coffee cups, plastic coffee pods, and cartons used to keep long-life milk and juice may seem recyclable but are actually complex multi-material packaging.

Coffee cups often have a thin plastic lining and long-life cartons (usually brick-shaped) contain both plastic coatings and a thin foil layer. These materials are difficult to separate during the recycling process.

Check to see if your council accepts these products. Usually, they'll need to go in your red rubbish bin. Coffee pods go in the red bin too, unless your supplier has its own collection scheme.

Hello yellow? Paper and cardboard, clean and empty containers

Dry cardboard and paper, including boxes used for packaging, are usually recyclable in the yellow bin if they're larger than A5 size. However, some councils offer a dedicated blue bin for printer paper, magazines, newspaper and boxes.

A rule of thumb is that if the material tears like paper, it can be recycled.

But tiny paper scraps and shredded paper are often better off in green bins, where they can be composted.

Remove as much tape and labelling from cardboard boxes to reduce contamination risk and improve recyclability. And leave out tissues and paper towels, coffee cups and soiled food containers.

"Recycling needs to be loose, reasonably clean and empty," says Hailey Durham, a senior program manager at Planet Ark. You should also check with your council whether container lids are accepted loose, attached to your plastic bottles or not at all.

Donate - don't dump - good clothes

Aussies send about half of their [unwanted clothes](#), about 229,000 tonnes - equivalent to the weight of three and a half Sydney Harbour Bridges - to landfill each year.

Good quality, reusable or re-sellable clothes should go into dedicated donation bins often found in public car parks and near supermarkets, or handed to your local charity shop.

Tailored textile recycling schemes remain relatively niche in Australia, although some organisations offer postal returns, home collections or collection drives.

Don't be fooled by the recycling loop

It's a complicated system for households, one where the rules can change by crossing the road. One in four Australians find the system confusing, with Cleanaway's survey finding overwhelming support for a nationally consistent approach.

The presence of a Mobius loop - the recycling triangle with chasing arrows - is not always the best guide. Two-thirds of Australians say they feel misled by packaging that claims to be recyclable, but isn't.

"Don't assume that what you could recycle in one house is the same as what you could recycle in the next," says Durham.

Fortunately there are resources available - from checking for the Australasian Recycling Label on the back of packaging (which provides clear instructions on which parts go in what bin), to refreshing your knowledge of council rules when you move house.

Several websites and apps also exist to help identify materials for each bin.

Planet Ark's [Recycling Near You](#) provides an extensive list of items and suitable recycling locations. The government and industry-funded [Recycle Mate](#) suggests the best household bin to dispose of items. South Australia even operates [Which Bin](#) specifically for its local governments.

For true precision, our experts say looking up your council website is usually the fastest and most reliable option to check what goes in which bin.

"They will have a list of what can and can't be recycled," says Leavesley.

And if in doubt, leave it out, says Durham, "because contamination is one of the biggest issues we have in recycling".

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