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How to Recycle Right®: What Consumers Want to Know

New WM data shows that while most Americans already recycle, many want to do more and are looking for clearer information about what belongs in the bin and what happens to materials after they leave the curb.



Key Takeaways

- **Three in four Americans say they recycle**, and nearly half are looking for ways to do more.
- **Recycling confusion remains a challenge**, with many consumers unsure what belongs in the bin or what happens to materials after collection.
- **More than three-quarters of Americans want to learn more** about how recycled materials are transformed into new products.
- **As the largest recycler in North America, WM is launching I Recycle**, a nationwide pledge and movement inspiring people to learn more about recycling and commit to better recycling habits.
- Individuals who take the I Recycle Pledge can enter for a chance to win a trip to the WM Phoenix Open, one of the world's largest zero-waste sporting events. *I Recycle sweepstakes official rules*

Can this be recycled?

Whether it's a pizza box, a yogurt container or a cardboard shipping package, many consumers have found themselves standing at the recycling bin asking that question.

The good news is people aren't turning away from recycling. New WM data shows that three out of four Americans say they recycle.

Today, the challenge isn't just getting people to recycle. It's helping them feel confident they're recycling right.

Nearly seven in 10 Americans say they would recycle more if they had a better understanding of what to recycle and how to do it correctly. They also want to know more about what happens to materials after they leave the curb, with more than three-quarters saying they're interested in learning how recycled materials are transformed into new products.

That's why WM is launching I Recycle, a new movement designed to help people recycle with confidence, build better habits and make a bigger impact through everyday actions that help support a circular economy.

From participation to purpose

While recycling participation has remained steady, interest in expanding recycling habits is growing.

Nearly half of Americans say they're looking for ways to recycle more, signaling a shift from simply recycling when convenient to making more intentional choices about waste and sustainability.

Generation Z is helping lead the charge. More than half (53%) say they are looking for ways to expand their recycling practices, representing a seven-point increase year-over-year and the largest increase of any generation.

Those looking to do more say they're focused on:

- Recycling a broader range of materials
- Increasing the amount they recycle
- Making purchasing decisions based on recyclability and sustainability

What prevents people from recycling more?

Despite growing enthusiasm for recycling, many Americans still have questions about how the recycling process works.

Only 24% of Americans say they have a strong understanding of what happens to recyclable materials after they're collected, even as 77% say they are interested in learning more.

That knowledge gap matters. In fact, 84% of Americans say they would feel more confident about their recycling if they better understood what happens to materials after they leave the curb.

Without clear information, even well-intentioned recyclers can end up "wishcycling" by placing items in the bin, hoping they're recyclable when they may not be. This can increase contamination, making it harder for recycling programs to recover and market valuable materials. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes that reducing contamination is a key factor in improving recycling outcomes.

Many consumers are also unsure about everyday items such as pizza boxes, plastic bags, chargers and small electronics, highlighting the need for clearer recycling guidance.

Confusion often extends beyond common household items.

Batteries remain one of the most misunderstood materials. In fact, only half of Americans say they are confident they know how to recycle lithium-ion batteries safely. Whether they're lithium-ion, alkaline, button-cell or rechargeable, batteries should never be placed in curbside trash or recycling bins.

Batteries in the trash or recycling can spark fires in collection vehicles, facilities and landfills, which is why WM added a fourth Recycle Right® rule: No batteries in the bin.

Residents should instead take batteries to designated battery collection sites, household hazardous waste facilities or community take-back programs.

What happens after recycling is collected?

After recyclable materials are collected, they are delivered to WM recycling facilities, where they are sorted, separated and baled before being sold to manufacturers.

Manufacturers then transform materials like paper, cardboard, aluminum, steel and certain plastics into pellets and other raw materials that can be used to make new products.

In other words, your recyclable items aren't at the end of their journey.They're being prepared for a new one: a second life.

How WM is responding

As America Recycles Day approaches on November 15, I Recycle brings together educational resources, community engagement and the I Recycle Pledge to help strengthen recycling habits across North America.

"As North America's largest recycler, WM knows that education is one of the most powerful tools for improving recycling outcomes," said Ryan Nordt, executive director of recycling operations, WM. "When people have the information they need to recycle right, small individual actions can create meaningful community impact."

At the center of the campaign is the I Recycle Pledge, which invites people to build confidence in what, where and how to recycle while encouraging others to do the same.

Across the country, communities are bringing the I Recycle movement to life through local events and educational programs. Organizations ranging from municipal partners and community groups to professional sports teams are helping encourage participation and reinforce the message that recycling starts locally and creates an impact nationwide.

On the I Recycle website, individuals can take the I Recycle Pledge, find answers to common recycling questions, download educational materials and learn practical ways to reduce contamination and improve recycling habits.

The platform also includes guidance on frequently misunderstood items including batteries, plastic bags and small electronics.

Turning interest into action

The I Recycle Pledge encourages people to:

- Learn how to Recycle Right®
- Reduce contamination
- Recycle consistently
- Encourage others to recycle
- Support stronger recycling outcomes in their communities

As an added incentive, individuals who take the I Recycle Pledge can enter for a chance to win a trip to the 2028 WM Phoenix Open, one of the world's largest zero-waste sporting events and a leading example of sustainable waste operations. *I Recycle sweepstakes official rules*

WM's I Recycle campaign helps people turn intention into action by providing practical tools and trusted guidance to recycle right and make a meaningful impact.

→ Take the I Recycle Pledge and learn more atI Recycle Pledge.

Methodology

WM recycling data is from a survey conducted online in the United States March 25-26, 2026, among 1,146 U.S. adults ages 18 and older via the HarrisX Overnight Poll.

https://mediaroom.wm.com/How-to-Recycle-Right-What-Consumers-Want-to-Know