

Oct 5, 2026

# The Hidden Fire Risk Buried in Your Junk Drawer

*What you need to know this Fire Prevention Week about safely charging, storing and disposing of batteries to help prevent fires at home and throughout the waste and recycling system*

-

-

-

-

-

Lithium-ion batteries can overheat, catch fire or explode when they are damaged or improperly charged. But charging is only part of the story.

Fire prevention doesn't end when you unplug a device. In many cases, another fire risk begins when a battery reaches the end of its useful life.

At WM recycling facilities, like the WM Cascade Recycling Facility in Woodinville, Wash., workers remove batteries from the recycling stream every day.

"We find batteries in the recycling stream daily," said Rick Stevens, manager, WM Cascade Recycling Facility. "Our facility has several types of fire protection technology, including heat-sensing cameras that help identify potential hazards. But the key is prevention. The only way to guarantee that batteries don't cause fires in the waste and recycling system is to keep them out of recycling and trash bins."

According to the [National Waste & Recycling Association](#), an estimated 5,000 battery-related fires occur annually at recycling facilities, and a battery-related fire occurs somewhere in the waste and recycling system nearly every day.

That old cellphone in a junk drawer. The rechargeable drill battery collecting dust on a garage shelf. The e-bike battery that no longer holds a charge. When batteries are mistakenly placed in recycling carts or trash bins, they can become damaged during collection and processing, creating fire risks throughout the waste and recycling system.

That's why Fire Prevention Week is a reminder to think about the entire lifecycle of a battery. From the day you bring a device home to the day that the battery is safely disposed of, every step matters.

### **Why batteries can be dangerous**

Lithium-ion batteries store a large amount of energy in a relatively small package. When damaged, punctured, crushed or exposed to excessive heat, they can enter a condition known as thermal runaway, a chain reaction that can lead to fire. During thermal runaway, [a battery's temperature can surge](#) from 212°F to 1,800°F in just one second.

The risks have prompted increased attention from regulators and fire safety organizations. In 2026, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission advanced a [proposed federal safety standard](#) for lithium-ion batteries used in e-bikes, scooters and other micromobility products. The proposal includes requirements intended to reduce overheating, thermal runaway and other battery-related fire risks.

While lithium-ion batteries receive significant attention because of their potential for thermal runaway, any battery can pose a fire risk if it is damaged, improperly charged, stored incorrectly or disposed of in the wrong place.

### **A battery safety checklist for every home**

Fire prevention starts long before a battery reaches the end of its life. Following a few simple habits can help reduce risks at home and beyond.

#### **Charge devices safely**

NFPA recommends the following practices:

- Use the cord and charger that came with your device or those approved by the manufacturer.
- Charge devices on a table, desk or other hard, flat surface. Do not charge on beds, couches or under pillows as soft surfaces can trap heat and block airflow.
- [Stop using a device](#) if it becomes unusually hot, begins to swell, emits smoke or produces a strange odor. These are warning signs a battery may be damaged or failing.
- Unplug devices when fully charged.
- Charge larger items such as e-bikes, scooters and power tools outside and away from exits when possible.
- When flying, keep charging devices where they can be seen and monitored.

#### **Store batteries carefully**

Proper storage can help reduce fire risks.

- Keep batteries and battery-powered devices away from excessive heat, direct sunlight and moisture.
- Store batteries in a cool, dry location and follow manufacturer recommendations.
- Avoid placing loose batteries where they can be crushed, punctured or damaged.
- Do not keep damaged, swollen or leaking batteries.
- Periodically inspect stored batteries and electronics for signs of wear or damage.



*Lithium-ion batteries from power tools can pose a fire risk if damaged or improperly disposed. Always take them to a designated battery collection or recycling site.*

### **Dispose of batteries responsibly**

For many households, proper disposal is the most overlooked step in battery safety.

A battery that no longer works may seem harmless, but batteries don't belong in curbside recycling carts or trash bins.

As part of its [Recycle Right®](#) program, WM recently added a fourth recycling rule:

#### **No batteries in the recycling or trash.**

Whether they're lithium-ion, alkaline, button-cell or rechargeable batteries, batteries should never be placed in curbside recycling or trash.

Cellphones, chargers and loose batteries routinely show up in recycling loads despite ongoing public education efforts. Once inside collection trucks or recycling equipment, batteries can be crushed, punctured or damaged, potentially igniting fires that put workers, equipment and communities at risk.

"The risk of battery-related fires has been a major challenge the last several years," Stevens said. [Especially in July and August](#), when it's hot and dry."

### **Here's what to do instead**

- Visit [BatterySafetyNow.org](https://www.batterysafetynow.org) to find a battery collection site near you.
- Check local [household hazardous waste programs](#) for battery disposal options.
- Participate in community battery collection or take-back events.
- Tape battery terminals before storing or transporting batteries for proper recycling.
- Properly dispose of old batteries promptly rather than storing them indefinitely in drawers, closets or garages.

### **Small actions can prevent big problems**

Fire Prevention Week serves as an important reminder that battery safety extends far beyond charging.

Safely charging, using, storing and disposing of batteries is crucial. Doing it right not only protects property but can also save lives.

## Learn more

- **Recycle Right®**: Find out what belongs in your recycling cart and what should stay out.
- **Household Hazardous Waste Guide**: Find safe disposal options for batteries, electronics, paint, chemicals and other hard-to-dispose-of household items, where available.
- **BatterySafetyNow.org**: Find a battery drop-off location near you.
- **How to Recycle Electronics**: Guidance for laptops, phones and other battery-powered devices.
- **What Happens to Your Recycling?**: Follow the recycling process from collection to sorting and preparation for end markets.

<https://mediaroom.wm.com/The-Hidden-Fire-Risk-Buried-in-Your-Junk-Drawer>