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'Green' solutions for batteries vary

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

In today's world where so many things are recyclable, or "green," household batteries have an identity crisis.

On the plus side, manufacturers have developed less-toxic, longer-lasting batteries. But battery recycling is still rife with confusion, and safety concerns persist for certain batteries.

Q: So do green batteries exist?

A: The greenest batteries are rechargeables, but for standard battery sizes such as AAA, C and D, they have never achieved mainstream acceptance. Although we routinely plug in our cellphones and music players to juice up the rechargeable batteries inside them, apparently most people would rather use disposable batteries if they have to occasionally remove the batteries from a device themselves.

Q: Couldn't I save money with rechargeables?

A: Absolutely, especially in a device that consumes lots of batteries such as a digital camera, since one rechargeable battery replaces more than 500 disposables. The latest nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries, sometimes called hybrid rechargeables, are your best bet.

Q: When a rechargeable battery finally dies, where can I recycle it?

A: The rechargeable-battery industry stepped up years ago and set up the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp., which also takes old cellphones. Enter your ZIP code at www.call2recycle.org to find a location among the hundreds of listed retailers in Western Washington accepting rechargeable batteries.

Q: That's great, but what about all the other batteries?

A: This is where it gets confusing. Most common disposable batteries, including AA, AAA, C, D and 9-volt, are considered a low environmental risk, so they are currently allowed in household trash.

Ideally, disposable batteries would get recycled to recapture their steel and zinc, but recycling opportunities are rare. A few area cities accept them at no charge at recycling events, and a handful of local businesses take them for a fee of \$1 a pound or more (check <http://your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw> for complete King County battery-recycling listings).

Battery recycling got thrown for a loop last year when the U.S. Department of Transportation tightened regulations because of concerns about batteries catching fire during shipping. For batteries other than alkalines, including rechargeables, you should now either separately bag each battery or tape the terminals before recycling. Some businesses that previously accepted all batteries at no charge, such as Ikea in Renton, have discontinued that service because of the new rules.

Q: What do I do with those little button batteries?

A: Button batteries used in hearing aids, watches and various other devices may contain toxic substances and should not go in the garbage. King County and Seattle household hazardous-waste facilities, including the Wastemobile, accept button batteries as

well as lithium batteries and all rechargeables. Some hearing-aid retailers also take old button batteries.

Q: Are button batteries dangerous?

A: They should be safe when properly used, but concerns have increased recently about risks from swallowing button batteries. More than 3,500 people, mostly children, swallow button batteries every year, according to the National Capital Poison Center in Washington, D.C.

Swallowed, a button battery can get stuck in the esophagus and cause a severe burn.

Infants sometimes swallow the shiny button batteries they find in household devices such as remote controls and bathroom scales. Make sure battery compartments are tightly sealed on electronic devices.

If you think your child has swallowed a button battery, call the center's 24-hour National Battery Ingestion Hotline at 202-625-3333 or visit www.poison.org/battery.

Q: Shouldn't there be some cool, 21st-century innovations that would make all batteries safe and green?

A: The electronics industry is working on it. Advances have already been made, especially in alternative energy, with dozens of systems available that power a device or a charger with solar energy or a hand crank.

These reduce the need for batteries and save money, and who doesn't get a charge out of that?

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services.

Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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