

Get energized by better battery choices, recycling options

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Ecoconsumer

Batteries energize our lives more than ever before. They power our advanced smartphones and wearable electronics, a zillion toys and gadgets, even electronic cigarettes.

We may need batteries, but we can also use our power as green consumers to reduce the environmental impact of the 3 billion batteries that Americans use every year.

Plug into that consumer power by choosing efficient, long-lasting batteries; recycling them when they die; and encouraging manufacturers to make better batteries and provide more recycling options.

Seeking longer life

Batteries contain potentially harmful substances, including chemicals and heavy metals, so the fewer we throw away, the better. Cutting down on our battery consumption also conserves resources and reduces mining, which helps address climate change.

Seriously consider rechargeables, since one rechargeable battery can replace hundreds of single-use (also known as disposable) batteries. The major household-battery manufacturers sell battery chargers and rechargeable batteries alongside their single-use batteries at many retailers.

A battery charger with four rechargeable batteries typically costs \$10 to \$30. Energizer recommends rechargeables for “power-hungry devices in your life like digital cameras, handheld GPS, MP3 players and electronic games.”

For infrequently used devices such as flashlights and certain toys, single-use batteries may be more practical than rechargeables.

In recent tests by Consumer Reports of popular brands of single-use AA household batteries, the magazine’s top-rated alkaline battery, Duracell Quantum, performed about as well as top lithium batteries tested — and they cost less than half as much.

Avoid supercheap or “no-name” batteries, since those often have a short life span and may contain toxic substances such as mercury.

Searching for answers

Figuring out the most economical and best-performing types of batteries for specific uses can be frustrating for consumers, and the battery industry has generally not been helpful in this regard.

For a quirky, informative consumer perspective on batteries, check out Michael Bluejay's Battery Guide (michaelbluejay.com/batteries). Bluejay is an Austin, Texas-based researcher and writer with an environmental bent.

Button batteries — those used in remote controls, hearing aids, “singing” greeting cards and many other gadgets — have sparked safety concerns. Several thousand children in the U.S. every year swallow button batteries, sometimes resulting in internal burns.

Button batteries may contain mercury and should go to a household-hazardous-waste facility for proper disposal (visit hazwastehelp.org for local locations).

Making recycling easier

Rechargeable batteries contain more toxic materials than other batteries and must always be recycled. The call2recycle.org website, funded by the rechargeable-battery industry, lists several hundred retailers in Western Washington where they can be taken for recycling.

Single-use household batteries are accepted for recycling at a few dozen locations in the Greater Seattle area; see kingcounty.gov/whatdoidowith for a partial list.

In 2011, three of the largest battery brands — Energizer, Duracell and Panasonic — formed the nonprofit Corporation for Battery Recycling (recyclebattery.org). It has the stated goal of establishing a national battery-recycling effort in which all battery companies “take responsibility for their recycling.”

That goal may be difficult to achieve. Not all battery makers may want to help fund a national program, especially smaller manufacturers based in other countries.

In the meantime, legislation has been introduced in several states, including Washington, to attempt to set up industry-supported battery-recycling efforts. Last May, Vermont became the first state to require that type of “product stewardship” battery-recycling program. It is scheduled to start in January 2016.

What kind of greener, safer batteries or increased battery recycling would you get a charge out of? As consumers, we can contact companies directly or use our purchasing power to energize our voices and make them heard.

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