

Frequently Asked Questions: Carton Recycling

We are excited to announce that starting on Earth Day (April 22, 2018) the City of Reading will be expanding its residential recycling program to include food and beverage cartons! This new addition to your recycling will help us further reduce waste in the city and lighten the load of our trash collections. All you need to do is rinse and recycle your cartons. Here are answers to some questions you might have:*

What is a carton?

Cartons are a type of packaging for food and beverage products you can purchase online or at the store. They are easy to recognize and are available in two types — shelf-stable and refrigerated. Shelf-stable cartons, like juice, milk, soy milk, soup, broth and wine, are found on shelves in grocery stores. Refrigerated cartons, such as milk, juice, cream and egg substitutes, are found in the refrigerated section of grocery stores.

What are cartons made of?

Cartons are primarily made of paper with a thin layer of polyethylene (plastic). Shelf-stable cartons contain a layer of aluminum as well, whereas refrigerated cartons do not.

Why should I recycle cartons?

Cartons are easy to recycle and can be transformed into everyday items like paper towels, toilet paper and even building materials. Recycling cartons decreases the amount of waste that ends up in our landfills, helps conserve our natural resources and create new economic opportunities.

How do I recycle cartons?

Recycling cartons is as easy as 1-2-3:

1. Empty your food and beverage cartons
2. Rinse your cartons if they have food remains in them
3. Recycle your cartons into your recycling bin

Simply place your cartons in your bin with all of your other recyclables. No special sorting is needed.

Do I need to remove the cap when recycling my cartons?

No. Please place cartons with the cap intact into the bin.

Do I need to rinse my cartons?

Yes, if your carton contains remnants of food, like thick soup, you must rinse it out before recycling like you would with any other recycling container. Containers with thin liquids like broth and wine do not leave food residue behind and are okay to recycle without rinsing.

Should I flatten my cartons?

No, you should not flatten your carton. Optic sorters used at Material Recovery Facilities have a higher chance of recognizing cartons for proper sorting while containers still retain their 3D shape. This means cartons can be sorted more efficiently in their 3D form and should not be crushed, folded or flattened before entering the recycle bin.

Do recycled cartons become new products?

Yes! Recycled cartons are turned into paper products you use every day, like tissue paper, office paper and building materials (e.g. ceiling and roofing tiles). And these “new” products are better for the environment, too. Producing paper from recycled content creates 74% less air pollution and 35% less water pollution than producing paper from virgin fibers.

Is there wax coating on cartons?

No. What you may see as wax on a carton is a thin layer of polyethylene (plastic) that is also recyclable.

What happens to the aluminum and plastic left over after the carton recycling process in a paper mill?

The aluminum/plastic combination left over can be used in different ways. Some mills are using the material for generating energy, while others sell it to plastic manufacturers that use them for lumber board-like materials. In some cases, the material ends up in a landfill. However, this is a small amount of material in comparison to throwing away the whole carton!

Other solutions for the leftover materials are in development. In the case of building materials, one company called ReWall uses the whole carton. The carton’s polyethylene plastic becomes the binding that holds the boards together in [ReWall’s](#) products.

Are cartons recycled into new cartons?

To maintain the integrity and strength of the carton package as a safe food grade container, using recycled fibers in new carton packages is not currently an option. However, because cartons are made with high quality paper sourced from sustainably managed forests, the paper from recycled cartons is a valuable commodity that is used in the production of other paper products.

What is the key to successful carton recycling? I hear that cartons are ending up in landfills when collected by recycling programs.

The paperboard found in cartons is among the highest quality fiber remaining in our waste stream. That's why we're working with Carton Council to ensure our community has carton recycling. They are working with mills nationally and internationally to recover valuable paperboard and recycle it into new products. Their investments in local recycling programs and technologies help communities like ours have access to effective carton recycling and sorting.

**This FAQ is based on information provided by the [Carton Council](#). Specific information about products made from our recycled cartons may vary in the City of Reading, depending on the current market for recycled materials.*

