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Recycling Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs (CFLs)

Long-lasting, energy-efficient compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) are transforming the way we light our homes. But do you know the right way to dispose of the bulbs when they burn out or break?

Earth911.com Lamprecycle.org

Bulbs, Breakage, and Contamination

If you've ever dropped a tube fluorescent bulb on concrete, you'll recognize the pop and puff of vapor that results. That puff of vapor contains mercury, a toxin and environmental contaminant. A small amount of mercury is also contained in the curlicue tube of a CFL, the energy-efficient bulb that is touted as a great way to [go green](#).

To put your mind at ease, one CFL possesses 100 times less mercury than in an older glass thermometer, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Still, because most of the mercury can be recovered if the bulb is intact, recycling is the responsible way to dispose of burned-out CFLs (and tube fluorescent bulbs, too).

Home furnishings retailer IKEA provides recycling bins in all its stores for free and safe CFL disposal (the only major retailer currently offering such a service). But many states and local municipalities are developing similar programs; you can find options listed at earth911.com. Or visit lamprecycle.org and click on State Lamp Recycling Regulations & Contacts. You can also contact your municipal solid waste agency. If there are no local recycling options, and your state allows it, seal the CFL in two plastic bags and put it in the outside trash. Never incinerate.



What to Do When You Break a CFL

If you break a CFL, the EPA recommends the following procedure:

1. Open a window and leave the room for at least 15 minutes so vapors can disperse.
2. Wearing disposable rubber gloves, carefully scoop up fragments and powder with stiff paper or cardboard. Then wipe the area clean with a damp paper towel or disposable wet wipe and use sticky tape to pick up small pieces and powder. (Don't use a vacuum cleaner for the initial cleanup; that will just disperse any remaining mercury vapor in the air and leave particles in the bag.)
3. Place all cleanup materials and gloves in a plastic bag and seal it. Recycle. Or if your state allows it, seal the CFL in two plastic bags and put it in the outside trash. Wash your hands.
4. The first time you vacuum the area where the bulb was broken, remove the vacuum bag when you're done cleaning (or empty and wipe the canister). Put the bag and/or vacuum debris, as well as the cleaning materials, in two sealed plastic bags and put it in the outdoor trash for normal disposal.