

Be Smart—Recycle that Old Cell Phone!

What should you do with your cell phone when it dies?

Is it safe to just throw it in the trash? If you recycle your cell phone, what happens to it?

Toxic heavy metals

The lifespan of a typical smartphone is 21 months.

Even though smartphones are made to be quite sturdy, their constant use and the occasional drop takes its toll, so this short time period should not come as a surprise. And with newer and fancier models being churned out every year, U.S. residents throw away more than 140 million cell phones every year.

If you cannot sell your old cell phone, what should you do with it? One option is to toss it in the trash. Doesn't it get shipped to a landfill where it is buried in some remote location far from human habitation?

The United States generates more than 2 million tons of electronic waste each year. Even though electronics make up only 2% of the waste in landfills, they represent 70% of the heavy metals found in landfills. It is these heavy metals that can cause long-term pollution risks and seriously affect human health. Dozens of different kinds of metals are found in a typical smartphone, many of which are toxic.

Lead, nickel, arsenic, and cadmium are just a few of the toxic metals found in most smartphones. In China, for example, soil levels of toxic metals at electronics disposal sites have been measured to be between 10 times and 100 times greater than normal levels of toxic metals in soil. **Exposure to these chemicals can result in a variety of adverse health effects, including birth defects, neurological disorders, and kidney damage.**

Recycling cell phones

You can also recycle your old cell phone. Most stores

that sell cell phones offer free recycling of old phones, and many companies give you cash for dropping off unwanted cell phones for

recycling, even if they do not work.

These cell phones are sent to a recycling center. If the cell phone is in relatively good shape, it may be refurbished and donated to organizations that serve those in need, such as military charities, senior citizen centers, and domestic violence shelters. Other cell phones are disassembled, and their components are reused by the cell phone industry. **Because many of the metals in cell phones are becoming increasingly difficult to find in nature, recycling these metals makes sense from both an environmental and an economic standpoint.**

Despite the obvious benefits of recycling, most old cell phones still end up in the trash. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, of the 141 million cell phones discarded in 2009, only 12 million were recycled. A great service project would be to set up a cell phone-recycling program in your high school. It only takes one person to make a difference!



Eco ATMs are recycling kiosks in the state of Washington that offer instant cash for cell phones and other small devices.

