




This Is What Happens When You Put the Wrong Thing in the Recycling Bin

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Here's What Really Happens to Your Donated Clothes



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By [Anna De Souza](#)

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Think someone else is getting cozy in the like-new sweater you just donated. What happens to donated clothes.

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You've cleaned out your closet and have a bag of [clothes ready to donate](#). You're feeling pretty good about yourself, and why not? The average American throws away 81 pounds of clothing and other textiles annually, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Agency, and at least you're recycling! But hold on a minute: **What happens to donated clothes?**

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Unfortunately, the journey is pretty bleak for clothes, especially those that fall under the [fast-fashion](#) umbrella. Let's take that fluffy, boat neck, poly-blend cream sweater you featured heavily on Instagram—but now, weeks later, are ready to part with. Where does your garment go? Ahead, *Reader's Digest* will take you through a few different scenarios. Read on for the skinny (jeans) on what happens to donated clothes, seen through the eyes of your barely used sweater.

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You donate your sweater to a local charity

After you drop off your sweater at the [thrift store](#), do you imagine a local needy family saying silent prayers of thanks to you, the benevolent donator? Sure, that could happen. And it's still helpful to donate your duds. Only 15% of clothing in the U.S. is recycled at all; the vast majority is just thrown away, according to the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association.

But unfortunately, most clothing donated to Goodwill, Salvation Army and other charities doesn't end up on the backs of needy children in your community. They get sold to textile recyclers. Sure, that's better than a landfill, but if your sweater isn't picked up in a few weeks, it can end up as carpet padding, insulation or rags—or even sold overseas.

"Many textile recyclers will take a portion of the clothing that they don't think they can sell in the U.S., package them up in by gender, size and season, and create huge bundles of clothes they then sell by weight to be shipped to less developed countries," explains Jennifer Zuklie, founder of The Swoondle Society, an online children's used clothing platform.

These items are then sold cheaply at "bend down" street markets, where customers bend down to select garments lying on the ground, and it's had a devastating impact on local indigenous markets. Countries like Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi have sought to ban clothes and shoe imports to protect local businesses, but only Uganda ended up enacting a ban in 2023.

You slide your sweater into a roadside donation bin


Pulling over for a donation bin to send said sweater on its way? Be careful. Many of those bins are for-profit textile-recycling companies posing as charities—or relying on your assumption that they are [legitimate charitable organizations](#) by putting their actual company identification in very small print.

Since only a fraction of items donated to a brick-and-mortar charity get sold intact within the community, cutting out the middleman at Goodwill and other thrift stores may seem like a good thing. But this practice takes money away from legitimate charities. Some states are fighting back against these deceptive bins: In 2025, Connecticut put out a warning to consumers and started issuing tickets (with fines of \$500) to owners of for-profit bins posing as charity drop-offs.

You drop off that sweater at the store's take-back program

Retailers such as H&M, Gap, Patagonia, Levi's, Madewell and others have in-store programs allowing customers to bring in worn garments. These are sorted to be donated or recycled, sometimes [in exchange for a discount voucher](#).

If you think these fast-fashion retailers are making next season's clothes from last, that's not the case. Recycling old clothes into new ones weakens the materials, and in the case of the plastic-heavy fabrics of fast fashion, it's tough to separate fibers into their native components.

Nationally, less than 1% of clothing is recycled to make new clothes, but companies are trying to fill the gap. Levi's created its first 100% recycled cotton jeans back in 2016; however, the prototype did weave in virgin cotton.  jeans made from 97% natural materials, including recycled cotton and wood pulp.

You toss your sweater in the garbage with t

Nearly 85% of us dispose of clothing in the same trash where we [dump our kitchen](#) tons of textiles per year. Plastics, which make up the majority of fast-fashion clothing, and the microplastics sloughed off the clothes end up in our waterways, soil and air.

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As your short-lived boat-neck sweater decomposes, it releases greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. And that's not even considering the resource consumption of the manufacturing process. Jeans, in particular, are major resource hogs, consuming

nearly 4,800 gallons of water per pair.

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What are alternatives to recycling?



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The average American buys 53 pieces of clothing a year, according to the Public Interest Research Group. That's four times higher today than in the year 2000. Honestly, does anyone really need one entirely new item of clothing a day? Here's what to do instead:

- **Buy fewer, more quality garments:** Often it comes down to just buying less. When you need to make a purchase, buy better, more durable clothes.
- **Wear clothes for longer:** If you buy quality clothes made from long-lasting materials, they don't wear out as quickly. Help clothes last longer by doing your laundry the right way.
- **Repair your clothing:** A broken zipper shouldn't send your clothes to the roadside bin or trash heap. Relearn lost techniques like fixing a hem or sewing on a button.
- **Swap, sell or donate directly:** Look for charities that request certain types of clothes, like business suits, coats and prom dresses, to give your clothes the best chance of being used instead of sold to recyclers. Online swap sites and marketplaces also allow you to donate or [sell used clothes](#) directly.
- **Recycle:** If you can't use, sell or [upcycle your clothing](#), feel free to donate it. Just know that your clothing might not end up where you think it will. But it is better than just tossing it in the trash.

About the expert

- **Jennifer Zuklie** is the founder and CEO of The Swoondle Society, an online member marketplace for trading children's clothing and accessories. The platform modernizes the hand-me-down tradition by allowing parents to trade in gently used or never-worn children's clothing.



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Things You Didn't Know You Could Donate



How to Donate All of Your Old Stuff



What Recycling Symbols Mean

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Anna De Souza is a digital and broadcast journalist covering beauty, style, technology and lifestyle. Uncovering tomorrow's trends today, Anna is lucky enough to test wearables that calculate calories through your skin, report on the latest runway trends as they unfold, and slather on beauty innovations that may soon earn its keep in a bathroom cab...

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