

Power to the planet

Rechargeable batteries make cents and sense.

Batteries might be small but they have a massive impact on the environment. Standard batteries used in toys, torches and TV remotes contain cadmium, mercury and lead. In landfill, these toxic metals can leach into the soil and groundwater, posing a threat to people and the environment.

The chairman of Clean Up Australia, Ian Kiernan, says across the nation we send about 8000 tonnes of batteries to the tip each year. He has called for people to think more carefully about how we dispose of them and switch to using rechargeables.

Kiernan says rechargeable batteries are becoming more popular but the long-term benefits will only be seen once they are widely accepted and people make a habit of using them.

“There is an upfront cost that may deter some people but the cost savings are real once the consumer persists with their use,” Kiernan says.

There are two types of rechargeable batteries for general use: NiCd (nickel cadmium) and NiMH (nickel metal hydride). Opt for NiMHs because they contain much less toxic material. Another type of rechargeable is the Li-ion (lithium ion) which is used in cordless phones, drills, mobile phones and laptops.

Unlike disposables, rechargeables, also

called secondary batteries, can be recycled. Battery World (www.batteryworld.com.au) has a program at some of its stores. Or, for \$55, Cleanaway will post a prepaid recycling box (20cm x 20cm x 12cm) to you. The cost includes delivery, return postage of the full box and recycling of the batteries.

The program is targeted at businesses – but why not order a box and encourage your community group, school or family and friends to recycle their batteries? See www.cleanaway.com.au/batteries.

Two years ago, Sanyo launched its rechargeable Eneloop, a NiMH battery that has been endorsed by Clean Up Australia. Unlike most other rechargeables, which tend to leak their charge, a stored Eneloop should still have 85 per

cent of its power a year after charging. Eneloop comes in AA and AAA sizes, and an adaptor can put AAs to use in place of C or D batteries.

Kiernan says one Eneloop will keep 1000 batteries out of landfill because it can be charged that many times before it needs to be recycled. It also saves the same number of disposables from being shipped to Australia from overseas manufacturers.

Alex Cochran, merchandise manager with retailer Dick Smith Electronics, says Eneloops are popular because they come already charged. “That’s a very good feature because it is adding value to the customer and it’s instant gratification,” he says.

If you have old disposable batteries, environmental retailer Todae sells a charger that allows non-rechargeable batteries to be reused up to 15 times. The Rezap Battery Recharger (\$79.95, www.todae.com.au) can also be used for rechargeables, and has built-in safety features to stop overheating and short-circuiting.

A technical adviser at Todae, Matt Phelan, says it’s important not to throw out disposable batteries (also called primary batteries).

“Put old batteries aside and do your research on the net or with your local council to find out where you can properly dispose of your batteries.” To find out about recycling, see www.recyclingnearlyou.com.au or phone 1300 733 712.

Phelan says Rezap is a good option for any disposable batteries you already own but, if you are buying new batteries, rechargeables are the way to go.

It’s also better to pay a bit more for quality rechargeables because they hold their charge.

