

# Stemming the Tide

Wearing well-made clothes and washing them less will help reduce microfibre pollution, experts find



## For Immediate Release

BRUSSELS, 23 February 2018 – A major report confirms that microfibres – tiny pieces of plastic shed from clothing made of synthetic fibres – are escaping waste-water treatment plants and ending up in the food chain.

While all garments shed to some extent during use and washing, the quality and type of fibre matters.

The review estimates that between 20% and 35% of all microplastics in marine environments come from synthetic clothing, and this share is growing.

To reduce the impact, researchers recommend investing in higher quality garments which appear to shed less, washing clothes less often, and washing on gentler cycles.



Increasing the amount of natural fibres in our wardrobes would make a “significant contribution,” to solving the problem, the authors said.

In a comprehensive review of microplastics science released by the Norwegian institute for consumer research (SIFO), a team of Australian and Norwegian researchers summarize how different textiles and washing methods contribute to the spread of microfibre pollution.

While the mechanisms are not yet fully understood, the harmful effects of this pollution include the ingestion of microfibrils by organisms in oceans, freshwater and coastal habitats.

The negative impact is compounded by toxic compounds which are attracted to and retained by the microfibrils.

20-35% of all microplastics in marine environments come from fibres shed by synthetic clothing, the review finds.

More than 60% of the world’s textiles are now produced from synthetic fibres.

### ***Exposing the scale of the problem***

Originally commissioned in 2014 to generate a better understanding of the issue of textile microfibrils, the review of 81 source documents shows that knowledge of the scale of the problems caused by plastics is only just starting to be exposed.

The work was funded by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CRDC).

Policies and technologies to substantially reduce release of textile microfibrils are urgently needed, the study says. “Strategies are needed to meet demand for textiles without overconsumption and without unnecessary harm to the environment or risk to human health.”

The findings will also hopefully lead to improvements in the way microfibrils are addressed in eco-assessment tools. Currently, tools such as the Sustainable Apparel Coalition’s Higg Index do not include microfibre pollution impacts in their assessments.

### ***Longer lasting, lower impact***

Brand-based initiatives could be helpful: Beginning in 2017, the US outdoor brand Patagonia will provide all customers who purchase a Patagonia synthetic item with information about how to care for it to limit the shedding of microfibrils in the wash and keeping what does shed out of the ocean. Practices include less frequent washing over the life of the garment, gentler washing and extending the life of the garment.

But the greatest contribution to lessening the damage of microfibre contamination of the environment should come from consuming and disposing of fewer textiles.

“A significant contribution would come from promoting long-lasting garments (“slow fashion”) based on increasing the proportion of natural, biodegradable fibre in the wardrobe,” the authors say.

“Fibres of plant or animal origin biodegrade naturally to harmless compounds which return essential nutrients back to soil or water for organism growth.”

Wool for example is made of keratin, a natural protein which has evolved with mammals for tens of millions of years, along with many species of bacteria and fungi in water and soil that thrive on it.

Unlike plastic-based fibres, wool is not something synthesized in a laboratory, which nature had never previously encountered before the 1950s.

Learn more about how wool biodegrades [here](#).

## ***Consumer-based solutions***

Regulatory solutions can take time. However, the report makes several practical recommendations that consumers can readily put into practice. Top among these are washing clothes less often with milder detergents, using front-loading washing machines with gentler cycles, and investing in high-quality garments which, made to last longer, appear to shed less.

“Use clothes made of synthetic fiber less, and especially clothes you wash a lot,” says study author Ingun Grimstad Klepp of SIFO.

“There is little tradition of regulating clothing consumption,” she adds. “For microfibre pollution to come under control, it’s up to you and me.”

Read the full report [here](#).

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