

Sustainable Textiles & Health | YMyHealth — YMyHealth

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As millennials, we are not only fashion-forward but also deeply concerned about the impact of our choices on the environment and our well-being. Sustainable textiles have emerged as a powerful solution that allows us to look good, feel good, and do good for the planet. In this blog, we will explore the crucial link between sustainable textiles and health, uncovering the risks associated with conventional clothing and the positive effects of adopting eco-friendly practices. Let's embark on a journey to discover how sustainable textiles can safeguard our health while preserving the beauty of our planet.

Our guide will be fellow millennial and Environmental Specialist, May Myo Myint. She is currently working with the [California Product Stewardship Council](#).

Myo Myint grew up in Myanmar, one of the most vulnerable countries against the impacts of climate change. When she was 13 years old in 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar, and her home was partly destroyed because of the strong wind. More than 300,000 people died in her country from the natural disaster.

The experience sparked her curiosity about climate change and the close relationship between nature and people. Since 2016, she has been working in the environmental field, and last year joined us in the States to pursue her graduate degree in the field at University of California Davis.

Risks of Conventional or Unsustainable Textiles

Chemical exposure

Our favorite fashion pieces may secretly harbor hidden dangers. Conventional textiles often undergo intense chemical treatments during manufacturing, including the use of harmful dyes and chemical finishes. Azo dyes, commonly used in clothing, have been linked to serious health issues, including certain types of cancers, Myo Myint shared with us. While the European Union has taken measures to ban these carcinogenic dyes, she told us that the US still lacks such regulations, leaving us vulnerable to chemical exposure.

“Groups, such as the Center for Environmental Health have conducted their own research and found high levels of BPA, Lead, and PFAS in various garment types,” Myo Myint said. PFAS stands for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances which are manufactured chemicals that take a long time to break down.

Fast-fashion items are especially concerning to her, as they are more likely to contain cheap dyes with vibrant colors. As we wear these clothes, our skin can easily absorb the chemicals, posing potential health risks.

Another issue people might not think about in relation to conventional textiles and clothing is the health and safety of textile workers. From the production of raw materials to the manufacturing process, workers – especially those in developing countries are facing long-term exposure to pesticides and chemicals in the processes,” Myo Myint said.

Embracing sustainable textiles eliminates these dangers and the ones detailed below, as eco-friendly materials prioritize natural and non-toxic dyes, ensuring our well-being.



May Myo Myint is an Environmental Specialist, currently pursuing a graduate degree in environmental policy and management at University California, Davis.

This summer, she is working in an internship at the California Product Stewardship Council, where she is learning firsthand about the Council's policy work and actions to protect consumers, and the environment from harmful substances used in the everyday products we purchase—many times without our knowledge that those components are there.

Allergies and skin irritations

Do you find yourself experiencing itching or skin irritations after wearing certain clothes? Conventional textiles often contain synthetic materials and chemical residues that can trigger allergic reactions and discomfort. Sustainable textiles, on the other hand, prioritize organic fibers and gentle manufacturing processes, significantly reducing the risk of skin sensitivities and ensuring a more comfortable wear.

Indoor air pollution

The impact of conventional textiles extends beyond our wardrobe. Indoor air pollution can arise from the chemicals used in clothing manufacturing. Substances such as formaldehyde and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) can be released from our clothes into the air we breathe at home, potentially affecting our respiratory health. By choosing sustainable textiles made from natural and non-toxic materials, we can improve indoor air quality and create a healthier living environment.

Environmental impact

The consequences of our clothing choices reach far beyond ourselves. In many developing countries, textile factories release untreated wastewater containing dyes, metals, and other pollutants into water bodies, contaminating local water sources. This reckless practice poses health risks to nearby communities who use the water and contributes to environmental degradation. By opting for sustainable textiles, we can help mitigate these negative impacts and support eco-conscious fashion practices that protect the planet.

Sustainable Textile Manufacturing Legislation

California Legislation

The global call for sustainable practices in the fashion industry has sparked positive change on the legislative front. A prime example is SB-707, also known as the Responsible Textile Recovery Act of 2023, a bill sponsored by the California Product Stewardship Council (CPSC). If passed, California will become the first state in the US to implement textile Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legislation.

“The EPR approach places the responsibility for end-of-life product management on producers and businesses involved in the product chain, reducing the burden on the general public. This encourages manufacturers to adopt sustainable product design that minimizes negative impacts on both human health and the environment at every stage of products,” said Myo Myint who is currently interning with CPSC. “It also creates a setting for recycled commodities markets to emerge, which helps support a true circular economy, attempting to mitigate the clothing industry’s staggering impact on the environment and overseas markets.”

While the Council awaits updates to the SB-707 bill, they have jump-started a few pilot projects partnering with the City of Los Angeles and City of San Jose, especially for regional and community-based textile programs. CSPC has been holding webinars that share the knowledge about impacts of textile waste on people and the environment and what can we do to mitigate the impacts, Myo Myint shared.



“CPSC is closely working with textile manufacturers, fashion brands, thrifts, and repair businesses regarding circularity in the clothing industry,” she said. “It meets monthly with the Statewide Textile Recovery Advisory Committee – a group of textile experts and businesses to strategize about textile product stewardship including from sustainable materials to waste minimization to stakeholder engagement.”

To learn more about the California Product Stewardship Council’s work to protect consumers and the environment from conventional textiles and increase the use of sustainable textiles, visit: <https://www.calpsc.org/textilestewardship> or email them at info@calpsc.org

National Legislation Covering Labeling & Use of Harmful Textiles

There are several laws that protect consumers against unknowingly wearing potentially harmful textiles nationwide in the United States, including:

- **Textile Fiber Products Identification Act:** This law, also known as the Textile Fiber Products Labeling Act, requires that textile products sold in the U.S. be labeled with accurate information about the fiber content. This helps consumers know what materials are used in the products they purchase, which can be crucial for people with allergies or sensitivities to certain fibers.
- **Flammable Fabrics Act:** The law is designed to reduce the risk of injury or death caused by the flammability of clothing and textiles. It sets standards for the flammability of certain textile products and requires warning labels on items that do not meet the established safety criteria.

- Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act: Although not exclusive to textiles, this Act includes provisions related to the safety of children's clothing and textiles. It imposes requirements for lead content, phthalates, and other harmful chemicals in products intended for children.
- Federal Trade Commission Regulations: The FTC enforces various regulations related to textile labeling, advertising, and care instructions. These regulations aim to prevent deceptive practices and ensure consumers have accurate information about the products they purchase.
- Care Labeling Rule: The FTC's Care Labeling Rule mandates that textile products must have care instructions on their labels, helping consumers understand how to properly care for and clean their garments.

By supporting such legislation and movements, we can drive positive change in the fashion industry and promote a healthier and greener future.

Sustainable Textile Manufacturing Processes

Sustainable dyeing and printing techniques

Sustainable textile manufacturing prioritizes eco-friendly dyeing and printing techniques. Natural dyes, derived from plants and other organic sources, are favored over harmful chemicals. These techniques not only reduce chemical exposure for consumers but also significantly decrease water pollution, making them an environmentally conscious choice.

Energy-efficient production methods

Sustainable textile manufacturers are dedicated to minimizing their carbon footprint. By adopting energy-efficient production methods and investing in renewable energy sources, they actively contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, preserving our planet's natural resources for future generations.

Waste management and recycling initiatives

Sustainable textile manufacturing embraces the principles of the circular economy. These initiatives focus on waste reduction, recycling, and upcycling, ensuring that clothing materials are repurposed rather than discarded. By supporting these practices, we can collectively work towards a more sustainable and waste-free future.



Consumer Choices for Sustainable Textiles

Reading labels and certifications

As conscious consumers, we can make a difference by looking for certifications like the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and the OEKO-TEX Standard 100. These labels guarantee that the products are made from organic and non-toxic materials, meeting stringent environmental and health criteria.

Ethical considerations in textile production

Supporting fair trade practices and worker rights in the textile industry ensures healthier working conditions for laborers and promotes a more equitable fashion landscape. Supply chain transparency allows us to make informed choices that align with our values.

“Coming from Myanmar, one of the developing countries with heavy textile exports, I can say that there are not many regulations that enforce the occupational health and safety for textile workers, and the majority of those workers tend to be women that migrate from rural areas and with little to no knowledge about the health risks from their work,” Myo Myint said.

Tips for Incorporating Sustainable Textiles into Daily Life

Sustainable fashion choices

Embrace the concept of slow fashion and invest in high-quality, timeless pieces made from sustainable textiles. Opt for versatility and durability to reduce the need for frequent replacements, ultimately minimizing fashion waste.

“Purchasing good products may be more expensive at first but buying for quality instead of quantity may be a good strategy for the long run to save money and literally to save ourselves from health issues,” Myo Myint said.

For the environment, in her opinion, the best thing we can do is to try to reduce buying new clothes and buy secondhand clothes, upcycled products or products made from recycled materials.

“We can also take better care of our clothes, so they will last longer – through practices like washing at lower temperatures, air drying, and avoiding harsh chemicals,” she said.

Eco-friendly home textiles

Extend sustainability beyond clothing by choosing eco-friendly bedding, towels, and other home textiles. Look for certifications that ensure non-toxic and responsibly sourced materials, contributing to a healthier living space.



Avoid microplastics

Microplastics, commonly found in synthetic fabrics, pose a significant threat to marine life and can ultimately enter our food chain. Opt for natural fibers such as organic cotton, hemp, and bamboo to reduce microplastic pollution and support sustainable fashion choices.

“To reduce microfiber pollution from clothing on the consumer level, we can promote better washing practices: washing less frequently at lower temperatures and in gentle wash settings,” Myo Myint said. She also recommends that we consider switching from synthetic fibers to natural materials, but points out that it may not be an ideal solution when we look at the whole lifecycle because this can create more burden on the land and water resources.

“We should demand that the global brands and manufacturers make measures to improve design or material in order to minimize such microplastic releases from the clothing. Policy makers have a responsibility to provide effective regulations and enforcement on microfiber pollution from clothing,” Myo Myint told us. “The good news for California is that the bill, SB 707 proposes the first global precedent for mandating industry funding to support microfiber filtration for laundries participating in the program.”



Conclusion

As millennials, we have a unique opportunity to drive change in the fashion industry. By understanding the health risks associated with conventional textiles and embracing sustainable practices, we can protect our health and contribute to a healthier planet. Let us

make conscious choices, adopt sustainable fashion practices, and collectively work towards a cleaner, greener, and healthier future for all. Sustainable textiles not only protect our health but also safeguard the planet we call home.

“I hope people can become more aware and start taking action no matter how small it may seem,” Myo Myint said. “This way, we can take better care of ourselves, our families, and the environment we live in.”

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