



# spinning



## what is it?

It's creating yarn from fibre; it could be fleece straight from a sheep, or fibre that you've bought, dyed or undyed. As well as sheep's wool, the fibre could be silk, alpaca, mohair, cotton, flax, ramie (nettle fibre), hemp – anything that can be spun. The yarn can then be used in a range of ways (depending on how it's spun): gossamer lace for a shawl; novelty or chunky yarns for knitting, crochet or weaving; or rope from flax or hemp.

### hand spindles

Spinning has been around forever, in all parts of the world. All ancient cultures used some sort of hand spindle for creating yarns. A hand spindle is basically a stick with a disc attached. The disc makes the stick spin for longer. In prehistory, discs would be made of stone. They could be taken off and attached to another stick. The Navajo spindle has a 3ft wooden shaft, one end of which is rested on the floor, and the other end on the user's leg. It is then spun by rolling along the thigh. At the other extreme, there is a tiny hand spindle made of brass, called a *takhi*.

You use a spindle by twisting a bit of fibre around it, then holding the fibre and spinning the spindle – by hand, by foot, or by rolling it off the thigh. Then as the twisted yarn is produced, you attach more fibre to the end of it, and it is twisted and rolled onto the spindle. The twisting is what holds the yarn together. Most spindles are made of wood – in Europe traditionally the wood was from the spindle tree.

You can spin using a hand spindle whilst you're doing something else. You can be in a meeting or socialising, or even feeding chickens etc; and you're mobile. With a wheel, you have to be sitting in your house. So in traditional societies, the hand spindle is still popular.

### spinning wheels

Wheels came later. The hand spindle was turned on its side and attached to a wheel to turn it. On a spinning wheel there is a separate bobbin (a reel for collecting the yarn) that moves independently of the spindle, which means that the spinner doesn't have to keep stopping to wind the yarn on. There are two different kinds of wheels. There is the traditional spinning wheel where yarn is taken into the wheel through a hole in the bobbin. The second type is the 'point of contact' wheel, which has a point that sticks out. The yarn is held at an angle, and the twist is put into it off the point of the spindle.

The 'great wheel' and *charkha* are examples of point of contact wheels; they are faster than traditional wheels and tend to be used for finer

threads. Gandhi used a *charkha* – a good wheel for spinning very fine yarns like cotton. In Britain they used the great wheel, which worked in a similar way, but was much bigger than the tiny *charkha*.

The spinning jenny was invented towards the end of the 18th century. The operator turns a handle that rotates 12 spindles simultaneously. Large factories sprang up in the north of England producing huge amounts of yarn, and almost all home workers using single-spindle wheels were put out of business. Most yarns nowadays are made on massive modern versions of the spinning jenny.

## what are the benefits?

- If you know how to spin, you can make beautiful yarns yourself that would be very expensive, or even impossible to buy
- If you have your own sheep, goats, alpacas or angora rabbits, you can spin your own yarn from your own fibre
- There are social networks of spinning groups; you can go to many places in the world and plug into a Spinners and Weavers Guild group
- You can produce garments with a very small eco-footprint; you can use local, organic fibres, and dye them using natural dyes
- It's a very interesting hobby, and a way of



'chair' wheels were originally made from old chairs turned upside down; made of oak and held together with pegs, this one has 2 wheels linked with a belt, to save space.



producing garments without feeding the exploitative and wasteful fashion industry

- Spinning can be a form of meditation, and have health benefits
- It's fun, and children can learn to do it too

## what can I do?

Maybe try spinning using a hand spindle first to see if you enjoy it. Traditional wheels cost from £300 new, and £90 second-hand (sometimes available from spinning groups or via the Spinners, Weavers & Dyers Guild website). Attend a spinning course (for practical experience) or read a book or two.

After you've obtained your fibre, you usually have to card it (although alpaca, angora and some wools don't need to be carded). Carding means aligning and separating fibres by combing with special brushes (carders) which produces a much smoother fibre to work with. You can buy fibres ready-carded from online suppliers. The main 3 fibre types are vegetable fibres such as cotton or linen; silk, which stands alone as a unique fibre spun by the moth of the silk worm; and animal fibres such as wool or alpaca. If you know someone with sheep, you can get fleeces very cheaply; and they are often given away. Then you can card it yourself and start spinning.

As a rough guide, once you've learnt to spin, it takes around 10 hours to spin the yarn required to



using a hand spindle.

make an adult's jumper. But when you're spinning, you can also be reading a book, watching a movie or listening to the radio. Blind people can spin, as can old or infirm people. Spinning and weaving have been used in therapeutic ways such as in occupational therapy. It's not used so often nowadays (partly because there are not so many occupational therapists who can spin or weave).

After you've made your yarn, you can weave with it, or knit or crochet. If you want to make something special, you can copy a type of yarn you've seen somewhere, or spin something unique. You can dye your fibre, yarn or finished item. And you can even spin your cat's or dog's hair (or other pets), as long as the hair is long or fluffy!

## resources

- Association of Guilds of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers, [wsd.org.uk](http://wsd.org.uk),
- Alden Amos, *Big Book of Handspinning*
- Lee Raven, *Spin It – handspinning*
- Shannon Okey, *Spin to Knit: the knitter's guide to making yarn*
- Jane & Nola Fournier, *In Sheep's Clothing: a handspinner's guide to wool - comprehensive look at the characteristics of the wool of 100 breeds of sheep*
- for these books and more, plus spinning courses around the UK, see LILI's website



a range of home-spun yarns, clockwise from top left: camel & silk; bamboo; merino & silk; shetland & alpaca; jacob's sheep.

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