



# low-impact clothes



## what are they?

It's difficult to define low-impact clothes in the same way as knitting, sewing or weaving, as there are so many aspects to consider. For convenience, we can categorise them in two ways:

1. sustainable - i.e. made from materials that are as natural (or recycled); durable (and mendable); produced without pesticides or other toxins; made locally, and with locally-produced materials (to reduce the distance that both the clothes and materials have to be transported); dyed with non-toxic, natural dyes
2. non-corporate - i.e. home-made, second-hand, or produced by small businesses, sole traders or co-ops

Historically, people tended to have a loom in their home, and further back still, clothes were made from whatever came from the immediate environment - mainly fur and skins. At about the same time as the agricultural revolution, weaving was born. The heddle - the device that splits threads to make cloth - is one of most significant inventions in human history.

Clothing is not only something that protects us and keeps us warm, it's also important culturally. There's a long tradition of oral history around textiles. For example, 'close knit' means that cloth has a balanced structure that holds together well, which is why the term is used for a well-functioning community.

Trade in textiles goes back a long way. In Europe, and in the UK particularly, wool was important, traded for silks coming from the East, along the Silk Road. Cloth was always valuable and precious, because of the skill and time required to make it. After the Industrial Revolution machines made things much easier, and since then more short cuts have been found using cheap labour and synthetic materials and dyes.

Low-impact clothes are all about reinstating the value of textile and clothing manufacture. There will be people in your community who enjoy making fabrics and clothes, and so we can give them our custom. Clothing was always a community activity. It wasn't usually possible to do everything yourself - it involved sheep farmers, growers, shearers, leatherworkers, felters, sewers, knitters, weavers, spinners and dyers.

Low-impact clothing will require a sea-change in the clothing industry, which bows to the demands of fast fashion. Because of advertising, the public tend to want new clothes all the time, and actually they need them, because of their poor quality. But now there is more of a premium on branding than on durability or sustainability.

## what are the benefits?

The benefits of low-impact clothing are best illustrated by highlighting the problems of the current high-impact clothes industry.

**Materials:** the introduction of petroleum-based, synthetic textiles made care of clothes easier, but as synthetics are non-breathable, your clothes soon smell, and they have to be washed more often, which requires more energy, water and detergent. The manufacture of plastics involves a lot of pollution, which causes environmental damage and health problems for workers in the industry; plus it's impossible to dye synthetic clothes with natural dyes. So, natural materials - but which ones? Cotton is the obvious choice, and you can now get organic and Fair Trade cotton. But cotton doesn't grow in temperate climates where the big markets are, and it requires a lot of water and usually a lot of pesticides, plus it tends to be grown in monocultures.

Linen (from the flax plant) grows in colder climates. It creases more easily and requires more care than cotton, but the real reason that cotton is so popular is because it's the only fibre that is traded on stock markets, so the global clothing industry favours cotton. Flax is the oldest textile fibre in the world, is extremely durable and has a unique cooling effect. It offers protection from the sun, but is very breathable. Linen for summer, wool for winter. Flax doesn't need pesticides or much irrigation.

Hemp is considered a weed, but is easy to grow in most climates, doesn't need much irrigation or pesticides and produces strong fibres and good clothing, not just rough fabrics like burlap sack.

Wool copes with hot, cold, wet or dry conditions. It adjusts because it's from an animal. Wearing a polyester t-shirt inhibits natural bodily functions and prevents the pores of the skin from breathing. Wool and natural fibres allow your skin to breathe.



*Hemp produces strong fibres and durable clothes.*

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**Provenance:** if clothes are made on a huge scale, short cuts are taken to maximise returns to shareholders, resulting in shoddy goods and sweatshops famous for paying workers a tiny fraction of retail prices; plus pollutants are concentrated, causing problems that nature could neutralise with small-scale producers (especially if producing naturally and for local markets).

But it's almost impossible to trace the provenance of branded clothes - there's so much sub-contracting. If countries made their own clothing, from local materials, trade in poor countries needn't suffer, as their domestic markets are growing. The lives of textile workers could become healthier and more satisfying. Perhaps then they could remove the nets around corporate factories that prevent workers from committing suicide.

## what can I do?

**Buying clothes:** ignore the fashion industry, which doesn't mean not being creative - it just means not letting other people tell you how to dress, and avoiding corporate brands, who try to turn you into walking adverts. The raison d'être of corporate fashion is to build obsolescence into clothes, and to persuade us to buy more than we need. Over 50% of clothes sold in the UK ends up in landfill. Even in charity shops a huge amount is baled up and sent to Africa, destroying the local industry - you can't compete with free goods.

Buy quality clothing that lasts, and if you can, from local, natural materials. The UK no longer has a clothing industry big enough to clothe everyone using UK-produced materials, although there are lots of organisations working on that. Looking at what your country can produce can reconnect



*Merino wool is used next to the skin for outdoor activities: it's soft; it wicks moisture away from the body, retains warmth when wet; and it contains antibacterial lanolin, which reduces odour.*



*If you see a blue field, it's probably flax, used to make linen, which is durable and keeps you cool when it's hot. So, wool for winter, linen for summer?*

people with the land in terms of textiles, generate greater respect for clothing and reduce waste.

Although a lot of sheep are raised in the UK, most wool is thrown away, as it's too expensive to wash, card, spin, knit, weave or dye it, relative to its price. Low-impact clothing will be more expensive than synthetic, sweatshop clothes, for obvious reasons, but could save you money in the long run, as you won't be throwing out clothes that are no longer trendy, and the quality will mean that they last longer; and a more general point is that money will stay in local economies, rather than being extracted to pay corporate shareholders. Pure wool contains natural oils that mean it doesn't need washing very often. Usually it just needs airing, saving energy and money.

**Making clothes:** if you're going to make your own clothes, see these topics on our website: sewing, knitting, natural dyes, spinning, weaving, felt making, leatherwork, and even keeping sheep. It's good to repair things - darning and patching are becoming more common; and if clothes from natural materials can't be repaired any more, they can be composted or used for insulation.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/low-impact-clothes](http://lowimpact.org/low-impact-clothes) for info, courses, links, books, including:
- Rosie Martin, *DIY Couture*
- Eithne Farry, *Yeah, I Made it Myself*
- Melissa Rannels, *Sew Subversive*
- Saffia Minney, *Naked Fashion*
- [clothes-press.net](http://clothes-press.net) - make your own clothes
- [diy-couture.co.uk](http://diy-couture.co.uk) - design your own fashions
- [labourbehindthelabel.org](http://labourbehindthelabel.org) - campaigning for garment workers' rights

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