

BUYING LESS BUYING BETTER

How did Fashion Get so Fast?



GreenFridays.org

From Seasons to Fashion 24/7

Fashion once largely revolved around seasonal collections. Fast fashion changed that, bringing new styles to shops much more frequently and at much lower prices.

Then came ultra-fast fashion: online-first brands using social media, data and highly responsive supply chains to identify trends and turn them into products at extraordinary speed. The result? An almost constant invitation to buy something new.

Between 2000 and 2015, global clothing production doubled. At the same time, the average number of times a garment was worn before being discarded fell by 36% (UNEP).



More Clothes. Bigger Wardrobes

As clothes became cheaper and more abundant, our relationship with them changed too.

The latest European Environment Agency figures show that the average EU citizen consumed 19kg of clothing, footwear and household textiles in 2022, up from 17kg in 2019 ([EEA](#)).

That's 19kg of new textiles for every EU citizen, every year (a large suitcase full).

And the problem isn't simply how much we buy. The fashion system has increasingly been built around rapid turnover: new trends, new purchases and replacing rather than repairing.

Fashion has moved from something we keep, towards something we continually consume.



The Economics of Fast Fashion

How can a T-shirt cost less than lunch?

Fast fashion combines huge production volumes, global supply chains, rapid manufacturing and, crucially, very cheap fibres.

Synthetic materials such as polyester can be produced cheaply and at enormous scale. Changing Markets reports that polyester costs around half as much per kilogram as cotton.

Low prices encourage us to buy more, while constantly changing collections encourage us to come back for more.

It's a powerful business model:

make more → sell cheaply → shorten trends → encourage another purchase.

And one group of materials has become central to that model: fossil-fuel-based synthetics. In other words, plastic.



Look at the Label: Plastic Clothes

Polyester. Nylon. Acrylic. Elastane.

They sound like fabrics. But they are also plastics, made predominantly from fossil fuels - mostly oil. And they now dominate textiles.

69% of all materials used in textiles are synthetic fibres (Changing Markets). That's more than two-thirds. Polyester alone accounts for more than half of global fibre production (Changing Markets).

We talk a lot about plastic bottles and plastic bags. Perhaps we should talk more about plastic clothes.

Deceptive labelling - look closely

We recently came across a garment whose label prominently referenced wool and natural fibres. You might reasonably assume wool was its main ingredient. Look at the small print, however, and only 20% of the garment was wool.

It's a useful reminder that a quick glance at the front of a label may not tell the whole story. Check the fibre composition. What percentage is actually wool, cotton or linen? And how much is polyester, acrylic or nylon?



How Does Oil Become a Dress?

For many synthetic fibres, the journey from fossil fuels to fashion is surprisingly direct:

OIL + GAS



PETROCHEMICALS



PLASTIC POLYMERS



SYNTHETIC FIBRES



POLYESTER • NYLON • ACRYLIC



CLOTHES



Polyester is essentially a type of plastic. It is cheap, strong, crease-resistant and versatile, helping explain why it has become the world's most widely used textile fibre.

Read more: This [Ellen MacArthur Foundation's](#) research highlights how heavily the textile industry depends on non-renewable resources, including oil used to make synthetic fibres.

Fashion Costs More Than the Price Tag

The environmental footprint of clothing begins long before we put it on.

Raw materials must be grown or extracted. Fibres are processed, spun and woven. Fabrics are dyed and finished. Garments are sewn, packaged and transported around the world.

All of this requires raw materials, land, water and energy and can generate greenhouse gas emissions, chemical pollution and microplastics.

In the EU, textiles now rank among the top five household consumption categories for environmental and climate pressures ([EEA](#)).

In 2022 alone, producing the textiles consumed by EU households required an estimated **234 million tonnes** of raw materials ([EEA](#)).



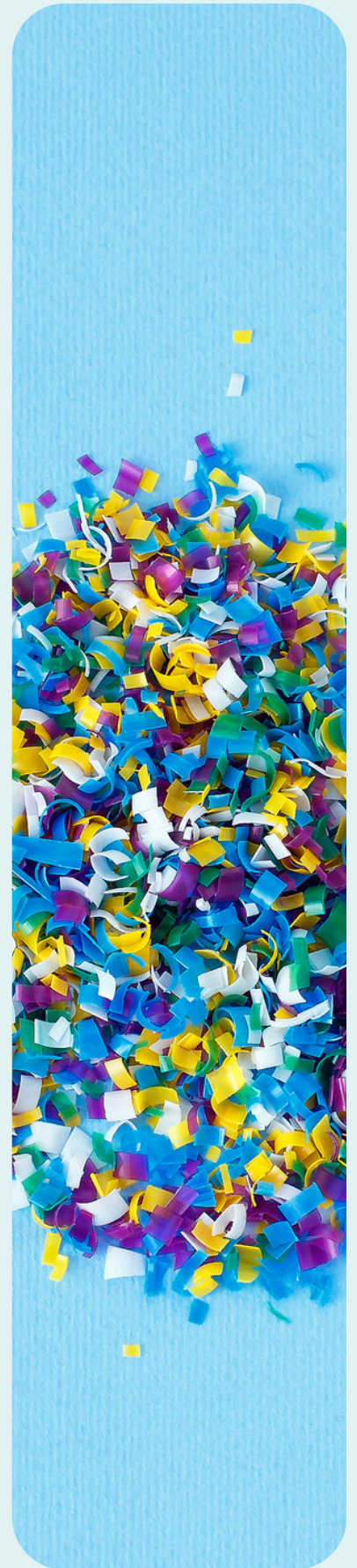
What Does This Mean for Our Health?

Polyester, nylon, acrylic and other synthetic fabrics don't just shed fibres in the washing machine. Tiny fibres can also be released as we wear and handle our clothes, becoming part of the dust and air around us.

Research has found microfibres from textiles in indoor air and household dust. Some airborne microplastic fibres are small enough to be inhaled, while fibres that settle in household dust may also be ingested ([National Library of Medicine](#)).

Microplastics don't necessarily stay outside our bodies. Studies have detected micro- and nanoplastics in blood vessels and human organs, including the liver, kidneys and brain. In one 2024 study of patients undergoing carotid artery surgery, polyethylene was detected in the arterial plaque of 58% of participants who completed follow-up. These studies look at microplastic exposure generally and do not show that the particles found in the body came specifically from clothing.

Scientists are investigating what this exposure means for our long-term health. Research points to potential effects involving inflammation and oxidative stress, but there is still much we don't know about the health consequences of everyday exposure.



Is Natural Always Better? It's Not That Simple

If polyester is made from fossil fuels, should we simply switch everything to natural fibres?

Unfortunately, there is no perfect fabric. Cotton is renewable and biodegradable, but conventional cotton production can require significant land, water, fertilisers and pesticides. Alternatives including organic and regenerative cotton, hemp, linen and lyocell can reduce some of these impacts, depending on how they are grown and produced.

Synthetics avoid some agricultural impacts, but bring fossil-fuel use, plastic pollution and end-of-life problems.

So don't judge a garment by one word on its label.

Ask:

- **What is it made from?**
- **How was it made?**
- **Will it last?**
- **How much will I actually wear it?**



Perhaps the Biggest Problem Is Volume

Finding better materials matters. Designing better clothes matters. Recycling matters. But none of these completely solves a fashion system built around making more and wearing things less.

Vivienne Westwood had it right: ***“Buy less. Choose well. Make it last.”***

Green Fridays’ Tips for a More Sustainable Wardrobe

It isn’t always easy. We’re trying too!

Start with what you already own. Wear it again. Repair it. Share it. Buy pre-loved. Check the label. Choose quality over quantity.

Avoid impulse buys where you can. And when you do buy something new, choose something you’ll want to wear again and again.

The best clothes aren’t necessarily new clothes. They’re the ones we keep wearing.



Green Fridays Takeaway

Fast fashion has changed not just how much we buy, but what our clothes are made from. Synthetic fibres, largely made from fossil fuels, now dominate global textile production.

There is no perfect fabric, but there is a simpler place to start: buy fewer clothes, understand what you are buying, choose quality where you can, and keep what you already own in use for longer.

Learn more, explore the sources and discover practical ways to help at GreenFridays.org/learn.

Next in our Buying Less, Buying Better. series:

What Happens to Our Clothes When We're Finished With Them?



THE GREEN ROUTE