



What Are the Most Sustainable Fabrics?

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What's in a label? What do we look for when we're choosing sustainable fabrics? Whether you're a clothes maker, or a fashion lover who doesn't love fashion's

impact on the planet, choosing sustainable fabrics is one of the first things we can do to make our wardrobes more eco-friendly.

But there is a lot of debate about which fabrics are truly sustainable. Does natural always equal good and synthetic equal bad? What happens when we wash or dispose of our clothes?

To help you out, the Good On You team has listed seven natural and futuristic fabrics that we think are the most sustainable. Read on!

Natural Fibres

Recycled Cotton

Cotton is one of the most common and most used fabrics (it represents nearly half the fabric used in the textile industry). This natural fibre is light and breathable which makes it a wardrobe staple. But growing cotton can be problematic: conventional cotton is one of the thirstiest and most chemical-intensive crops to grow. It requires a lot of pesticides and, as a result, has a negative impact on the planet, and the people who grow it. Organic cotton, a more sustainable alternative to conventional cotton, has been booming in the last few years. It aims to minimise the environmental impact of cotton production by trying to remove harmful pesticides and other chemicals from the production process. Check if your organic cotton is GOTS-certified to ensure high standards in production.

If you're looking for the most sustainable cotton, however, go recycled. Recycled or upcycled cotton is made using post-industrial and post-consumer cotton waste. According to the Higg Materials Sustainability Index, recycled cotton is a more sustainable alternative to both conventional and organic cotton. It has the potential to help reduce water and energy consumption, as well as help keep cotton clothes out of landfill – which is why we consider it one of the most sustainable fibres on the market.

Organic Hemp

It seems like hemp is everywhere at the moment. Marijuana's 'sober cousin' is extremely versatile: it's used as a food, a building material, in cosmetics, and it has been cultivated and used for hundreds of years as a fabric.

The great thing about hemp is that it's grown all around the world and it requires very little water, no pesticides, and naturally fertilises the soil it grows in – making it much better for the environment than other crops.

One of the oldest fibres in the world, hemp helps keep you warm in winter and cool in summer, and gets softer the more you wash it. For all these reasons, we also consider hemp one of the most sustainable fabrics out there.

Organic Linen

Linen is another natural fibre we've been growing for centuries. Similar to hemp, it's derived from a very versatile crop: the flax plant. Linen requires minimal water and pesticides, and even grows in poor-quality soil. Plus, every part of the plant is used, so nothing is wasted. Linen is strong, naturally moth resistant, and, when untreated (i.e. not dyed), fully biodegradable. In addition to being good for the planet, it is also light and can withstand high temperatures, absorbing moisture without holding bacteria. What's not to like?

Natural, sustainable fabrics have the advantage of being biodegradable and avoid using the plastics that go hand in hand with the fossil fuel industry. Not every natural fabric has made the list, however, with bamboo, wool and leather bringing their own complex issues which mean we're cautious about recommending them outright.

Fashion is all about innovation, so what is the industry doing to create new sustainable fabrics? Here are some of the new types of high-tech synthetic fibres that have also made it onto our list.

Futuristic and Innovative Fabrics

Tencel

TENCEL® is a light cellulose fabric, which means it is created by dissolving wood pulp. The fibre is produced by Austrian company Lenzing AG. It's been growing in popularity recently, as is said to be 50% more absorbent than cotton, and requires less energy and water to produce. Plus, the chemicals used to produce the fibre are managed in a closed-loop system. This means the solvent is recycled which reduces dangerous waste.

In addition to this, Tencel has moisture-wicking and anti-bacterial properties, which makes it perfect for activewear!

Pinatex

When it comes to vegan leather alternatives, Piñatex is the material to look out for. This futuristic material made from pineapple leaf fibre and manufactured by Ananas Anam was featured in Vogue in 2017! Who knew pineapple food you can also wear?

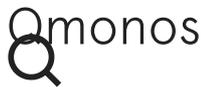
Not only is it a cruelty-free replacement for leather, it is natural and sustainable. As Piñatex is made from a food by-product, it reduces waste and helps the farming communities that grow the fruit!

Econyl

Another recycled fabric we really like is Econyl. This fibre, created by Italian firm Aquafil, uses synthetic waste such as industrial plastic, waste fabric, and fishing nets from the ocean, then recycles and regenerates them into a new nylon yarn that is exactly the same quality as nylon.

This regeneration system forms a closed-loop, uses less water, and creates less waste than traditional nylon production methods. Waste is collected, then cleaned and shredded, depolymerised to extract nylon, polymerised, transformed into yarn, and then re-commercialised into textile products. Econyl is a promising fibre, far more sustainable than nylon.

We should caution that traditional washing of Econyl can still shed plastic microparticles that can end up in the ocean. So with this product, it's best to go with seldom-washed items like sneakers or pick yourself up a Guppy Bag.



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Spiders aren't just tiny (or, in Australia, huge) and sometimes scary arachnids – they're also a great source of inspiration for sustainable fashion. In fact, Qmonos, a synthetic spider silk, has recently been developed through the fusion of spider silk genes and microbes. The fibre is said to be five times stronger than steel, the toughest fibre in nature, while being very lightweight, more flexible than nylon, and entirely biodegradable.

No spiders are farmed or harmed in the manufacturing process, making Qmonos a more sustainable and ethical alternative to silk and nylon.

At Good On You, we always recommend you check a brand before you buy from it. Look for transparency and if the brand is giving information about the fabrics it uses, where they're sourced from, and how they're handled. It's also important to consider the working conditions and the manufacturing when thinking about the sustainability of a fabric. Be sure to choose brands that are transparent and open to ensure you're making the most ethical choice. And when in doubt, know that buying second-hand is almost always the most sustainable option.

If you want to learn more about the fabrics you're wearing, here's how you can check if they're sustainable.

Editor's note: feature image via Unsplash.