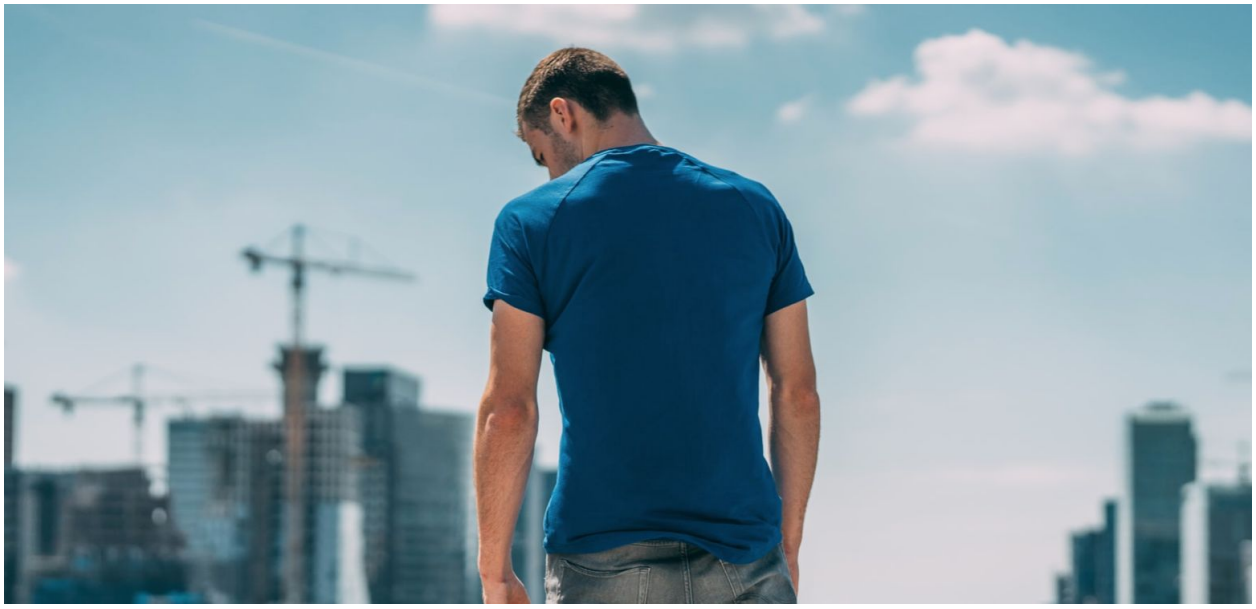
# Polyester Is Plastic



With the rise of athleisure brands like Gymshark & Lulu Lemon, sports clothing has now got a firm place in the fashion arena, with the market size expected to reach $567 billion by 2024. However, what most don't realise, a HUGE proportion of athleisure products are made from **PLASTIC**, more specifically polyester. This year (2019) 2 billion polyester t-shirts were produced, and this is set to rise by 2025 to 2.5BN t-shirts. That figure is just t-shirts, and doesn't even begin to cover everything else containing polyester.

## What is Polyester?

Polyester is made from the most common type of plastic in the world polyethylene terephthalate (PET). This in turn comes from crude oil, a fossil fuel, and therefore a significant contributor to climate change. *Synthetic fibres such as polyester, nylon, acrylic and others are all forms of plastic.*

## The Hidden Prominence of Plastics in Clothing

A huge amount of focus has been placed on packaging and single use plastics, and rightly so. However, very little focus is being invested in the impact that plastic in clothing is having on our world. This will only continue if changes are not made.

Polyester is one of the fastest-growing fashion categories, with synthetic fibres currently making up about 60% of the material used in clothing worldwide. Greenpeace forecast the amount of plastic in our clothes to double by 2030, with Fashion United, citing the athleisure trend to be one of the main reasons behind it.

In a world where the public are rallying to reduce plastic use, the opposite is happening with plastic use set to double in just over 10 years. This is partially down to the fact that many don't know where their clothes come from, or the materials and chemicals used to make them. In short, **most don't actually realise their clothes are made of plastic.**

## Blended Fabrics

Blended fabrics, with polyester and other materials such as nylon and elastane make up the majority of the textiles in the world today. It is almost impossible to recycle these fabrics. Getting the plastic out of a blended fabric is like trying to get the eggs out of a cake. While there is technology being developed to try and overcome this, nothing is yet available.

Major sportswear brands like Nike & Adidas have made steps in the right direction by using recycled polyester. However, there is still more to do. It's important to understand that recycled polyester products still release microplastics into our environment. A paper published in 2011 in the journal Environmental Science & Technology revealed that these microfibers make up as much as 85% of man-made debris on global shorelines.

As we now know microplastics have been proven to have a devastatingly negative impact on marine life and there are now concerns for human life too, with the air we breathe being polluted with these microplastics.

In addition to the issue of micro plastics, it's worth also noting that plastic cannot be infinitely recycled. The more times a plastic is recycled, the more it degrades. As a result it must eventually end up in landfill, creating a long term problem.

## Why Use Plastics in Clothing?

When it comes to clothing brands using polyester, it's worth noting, polyester does inherently perform better when it comes to sport. The fabrics are designed to be breathable and quick-drying, properties conventional cotton products do not have.

So when it comes to making something that will allow an athlete to perform at their best, it's an understandable choice.

While it's easy to demonise the individual brands using these products or materials, it's not necessarily the answer. In some instances, better alternatives are not available.

All that being said, what cannot be ignored is the volume being produced & consumed. Most of us don't need products made with these materials unless we are athletes or are wearing hi-vis PPE. While there is a need for these products, we should minimise their use and find alternatives where possible.

Some alternatives, like bamboo, do exist but the demand isn't as high as that of polyester; which in turn means the supply chains for these materials and products are not as resilient, nor as readily available. With sales of polyester products soaring there is less investment into alternatives compared to other markets like packaging where a great deal of focus is being placed on finding alternatives to cater to the public demand.

## How Can Plastic In Clothing Be Prevented?

The real question is, what can be done?! The answer is a simple one, *consume less and demand more*. Where possible don't buy anything. Where you do need to make a purchase, check the fabric composition label and opt for organic cotton, bamboo, or other natural fabric that will degrade over time.

If polyester or other synthetic fibres are essential, keep it minimal, and encourage brands to look into alternatives.

And finally, it's about accepting there isn't a silver bullet that resolves it all; most options are a step in the right direction. Although that's a harder marketing pitch, it's the reality. If we keep encouraging these innovative steps forward and demanding more from retailers, we will begin to see the changes needed. After all, money holds the real power.