

Though it might seem like a pedestrian chore, doing the laundry has a much bigger impact on the planet than you might think, around 25% of our clothing's life cycle impact comes from washing and drying. Here in the UK, that equates, on average, to 468 wash cycles per year, for a family of four.

There are many ways we can try to reduce our impact, the most obvious one being to only wash clothes when they are dirty. Estimates suggest that around 90% of the clothes that go through a laundry cycle, are in fact too clean to wash. We could sponge off little messes, air our clothes on the line after wearing to make them last longer, do a sniff test on tops, not worry if we wear something multiple days in a row.

We have all been encouraged in recent years to reduce the temperature of our wash cycles to save energy. Many of us may not however, realise that those lower temperature, synthetics and delicates programs use significantly more water, partly due to the fact that load sizes are supposed to be reduced accordingly - in the case of my machine from 8kg on a cotton setting to 1kg for a delicate wash. There is also sadly, a much more detrimental impact to those, low temperature, high water volume wash settings, which I will come back to.

Around 70% of the energy usage of a wash cycle can be attributed to the tumble dryer and around 32% of us still use our tumble dryers even in the summer. Line drying outdoors will always be the best option, but where that is not possible, a clothes horse or Sheila's maid (Traditional ceiling pulley rack) are good options. To reduce associated moisture build up in your homes, open a window, run a higher rev spin cycle on your machine, or use a dehumidifier. Whilst not ideal, the energy usage of the latter two is still significantly less than that of a tumble dryer.

Ironing both consumes electricity and deteriorates fabric. Hang clothes as soon as the wash cycle has finished, the water still in them will work with gravity to pull most wrinkles out, or cut the final spin cycle (and yes, that does contradict the advice to spin more to avoid tumble drying!).

Many of us will be aware that the wash cycle releases microplastics (a term coined by Professor Richard Thompson from Plymouth University) from our clothing, into our waterways. It is estimated that a city the size of Berlin, releases microfibrils equivalent to 500,000 plastic bags every single day. Given that nearly two thirds of clothing now contains some form of plastic, and that waste treatment plants are not able to filter those particles, those bits of plastic end up in our taps and out in the sea. Up to 30% of marine plastic pollution is suspected to be from tiny particles released by households and businesses.

Previous assumptions were based around agitation in a wash cycle being responsible for the release of these fibres, cotton cycles typically using higher temperatures, less water and more agitation, synthetics, lower temperatures, more water, less agitation. The University of Newcastle has found that delicate wash cycles release on average, 800,000 more plastic microfibrils than lower water volume settings. Somewhat ironically, the high volume of water, which is supposed to protect sensitive clothing from damage, actually "plucks" away more fibres from the material.

What can we do? Over time, replace our synthetic clothes with natural materials; wash synthetics less often, with colder wash settings and for a much shorter duration; fill your washing machine; don't put solid items like shoes, in with the wash. Consider buying a Guppy friend wash bag or Cora Ball, both of which are designed to catch the microfibrils. There are pros and cons to each and neither device is cheap – around £25-£30 apiece. This doesn't of course solve the problem of microplastics, you are still left with a blob of fibres that need to go in your black bin, but better there than in our waterways.

So, in summary, the suggestions for reducing the environmental impact of your laundry can be contradictory, depending on what you are trying to achieve. I will be trying to reduce water consumption and the release of microplastics; others may try to stop using their tumble dryer. The only clear-cut message that we can all take, whatever target we set ourselves, is that the most effective way to reach any of them, is purely and simply, to wash less.