

Synthetic fibres contribute to plastic pollution

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Polyester and other synthetic fibres such as nylon are major contributors of microplastic pollution in the environment, say researchers and suggest switching to biosynthetic fibres may help prevent this.

“These materials, during production, processing and after use, break down and release microfibrils that can now be found in everything and everyone,” said Melik Demirel, professor at the Pennsylvania State University in the US.

Synthetic fibres are petroleum-based products, unlike natural fibres such as wool, cotton and silk, which are recyclable and biodegradable.

Mixed fibres that contain both natural and synthetic fibres are difficult or costly to recycle.

In the oceans, pieces of microscopic plastic are consumed by plants and animals and enter the human food chain through harvested fish.

In the study, Mr. Demirel suggested “few things to prevent this: minimising the use of synthetic fibres and switching to natural fibres such as wool, cotton, silk and linen, even though synthetic fibres are less expensive and natural fibres have other environmental costs, such as water and land-use issues; large scale use of bacteria that could aid in biodegradation of the fibres for reuse; substituting synthetic fibres with biosynthetic fibres, that are both recyclable and biodegradable; and blending synthetic fibres with natural fibres to lend them durability and make them recyclable.

The study was presented at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

