

Good, Better, Best — Reducing Textile Waste

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This is the fourth in a [series](#) of articles providing options for reducing the amount of the most common materials in household waste.

Fabric seems like an oddly specific item to make the list of top waste categories. But textiles are the sixth most common material in the garbage.

Textile waste is a fairly new problem. Historically, fabrics were expensive, labor-intensive materials that would be reused until there was almost nothing left to throw away, and [even rags](#) would be recycled into new fabric or paper. Modern [textile recycling](#) is much less thorough.

Today, textiles comprise [6.3 percent of municipal solid waste](#). We've rounded up some good, better, and best options for reducing the textiles your household throws away.

Textile Waste

After paper, food, plastic, yard waste, and metal, textiles make up the largest component of household waste. Most textile waste is discarded clothing. But furniture, carpets, bedding, and even footwear and tires contribute to the total. The EPA estimates that textile waste generation was [16.9 million tons](#) in 2017. Only 2.6 million tons of textiles (about 15 percent) were recycled that year.

Textile waste has increased 811 percent since 1960, and this is at least partly the result of the rise of [fast fashion](#). One study found that the number of times a piece of clothing is worn before being discarded has [decreased 36 percent](#) in the past 15 years.

Good

A good time to start cutting down on textile waste is *before* you shop. [Precycle](#) by being more selective with your clothing purchases and only buying what you will actually wear. Buy the best quality you can afford and choose second hand when possible.

Learn how to care for your clothes and do basic repairs so your clothes last longer. Don't assume that just because you no longer want an item of clothing no one else will. You may be able to [resell](#) expensive and fashionable items, but even older and somewhat worn items can be donated to charity. To paraphrase a cliché, one person's old trash is another's vintage treasure. Help others reduce their textile waste by organizing a [clothing swap](#).

Better

Items that are too worn or damaged to donate may still contain enough good fabric to [repurpose](#), and the potential [upcycling uses of T-shirts](#) and [denim](#) are myriad.

However, you may not have a need for (or time to make) recycled products from worn-out pieces of clothing and fabric scraps. If you're not a crafter, T-shirts (together with old sheets and towels) are good candidates for use as cleaning rags. This will also cut down on [paper waste](#).

Curbside [textile recycling](#) is rare, but there are places that accept textiles for recycling. Download the [iRecycle app](#) or search the Earth911 [recycling database](#) on your computer to find out if there is a textile recycler near you.

Closing the loop with [renewed](#) and [recycled](#) clothing can be more expensive than mall brands, but are a better choice when you can't find what you need second hand.

Best

Once you've stopped adding used clothing to the landfill, turn your attention to [household furniture](#), [carpets](#), [mattresses](#), and other less obvious sources of textile waste. As with clothes, consider whether the life of an item can be extended through deep cleaning or reupholstery before getting rid of it. (If you reupholster furniture, be sure to recycle the old fabric.)

When you no longer want usable items, donate them rather than disposing of them. Use the Earth911 database to look for recycling options for unusable items. If disposal is your only option, learn to disassemble items so that you can recycle the components, including upholstery fabric.

Shoes are another challenging product because they contain a combination of textiles, plastic, and leather. Wear your shoes [as long as possible](#), then find out where to [recycle tennis shoes](#). When you buy new shoes, seek out those made with [recycled materials](#).

Often, the easiest way to deal with bulky items like furniture and mattresses is through [producer responsibility](#) programs. As with clothing, buy less, buy less often, and when you must buy, get secondhand or recycled products. When purchasing new, look for carpet suppliers and [mattress brands](#) that offer take-back programs.

If you are really serious about keeping textiles out of the landfill, it is possible to achieve zero textile waste.

Feature image by [Charles Deluvio](#) on Unsplash

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