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Getting a Greener Clean for Your Laundry



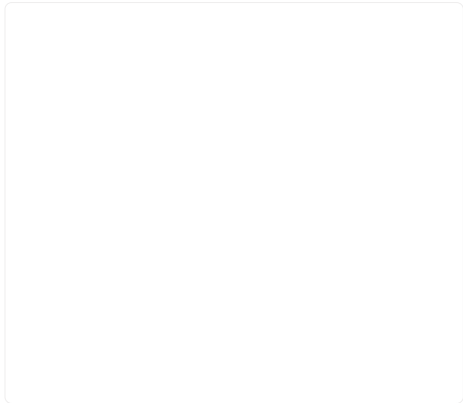
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Everyone knows that fast fashion is hard on the planet. But whether you buy cheap clothes from the mall or expensive sustainable brands, you have to wash your clothes. Fortunately, laundering is a relatively small part of your [clothing's carbon footprint](#) . But how you maintain your clothes can still make for a [more sustainable wardrobe](#) . How do know if a laundry detergent really is safe for the environment or if it's just greenwashing?

Low Impact Laundry

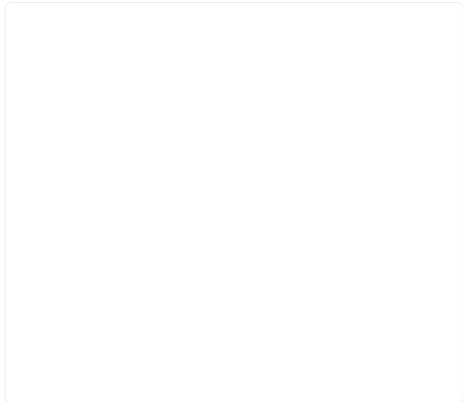


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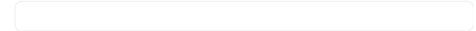
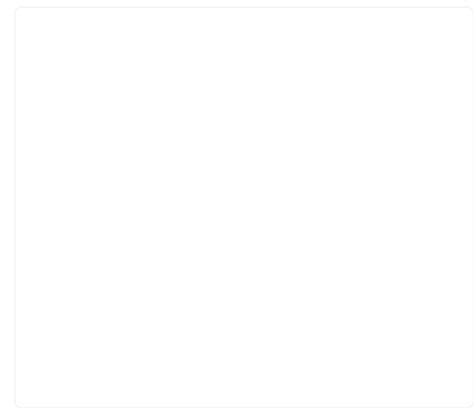
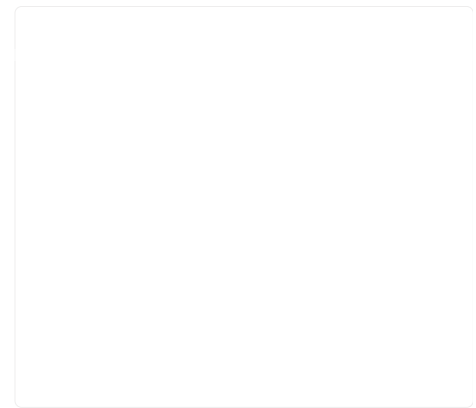
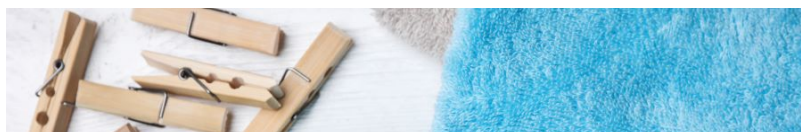
Leaving aside the question of [dry cleaning](#) for now, the environmental impact of your laundry is mostly determined by the machines you use. Your choice to line dry or use a [clothes dryer](#) (and if so, which one) has an impact on your household energy use. Your choice of [washing machine](#) affects both energy use and water consumption. But those are decisions you make once and live with for years. You have the opportunity to choose a greener laundry detergent every few weeks.

Choosing an environmentally friendly laundry detergent is not always easy. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not require brands to provide a full list of ingredients on the label. You have to go to the manufacturer's website to find complete ingredient lists. You can also look for labels like the EPA's [Safer Choice](#), which certifies a product only uses ingredients from EPA's Safer Chemicals List, or the more stringent verification system of the [Environmental Working Group](#).

Toxicity

Like [hand soaps](#), the ingredients in laundry detergent are not well-regulated, which makes [safer shopping](#) complicated. Fortunately, laundry detergents in the United States [no longer contain phosphates](#), but there is still a laundry list (sorry) of commonly used [ingredients that you should avoid](#). The simplest strategy is to choose unscented laundry products, since the term "fragrance" in the ingredients list can be used to hide toxic chemicals and [hazardous VOCs](#). If you prefer your laundry scented, it's not very hard to [make your own detergent](#) scented with natural essential oils. You can also [ditch the fabric softener](#) and scented dryer sheets completely, or switch to white vinegar and [wool dryer balls](#).

Aside from fragrances, avoid added [optical brighteners](#) that make whites appear whiter. These long-lasting optical brighteners stay in clothes after washing and can cause skin irritation. They can also be toxic to marine life when they make their way into the wastewater stream. Use [eco-friendly stain removers](#) like talcum powder and club soda or buy non-chlorine oxygen-based bleaches like [Seventh Generation's stain remover](#) instead.





When choosing a laundry detergent, avoid potentially toxic ingredients like "fragrance" and optical whiteners.

Carbon Footprint

One European [life cycle analysis](#) that looked at different types of household cleaners concluded that the [most significant variables](#) for laundry detergents were the water temperature, product dosage, and choice and amount of surfactant. The first two factors are under the user's control; washing in cold water and using only the recommended amount of detergent will go a long way to reduce the impact of your detergent. (Note, however, that this study only evaluated powder and tablet laundry detergents. These likely have lower transportation impacts than heavier liquid detergents.)

Without surfactants, your clothes won't get clean, but [surfactants](#) are environmentally damaging. [Nonylphenol ethoxylates](#), or NPE, are toxic to fish and make aquatic environments more susceptible to other pollutants. Although the largest detergent manufacturer in the U.S. (Proctor & Gamble) no longer uses NPEs, their use is still legal. Natural surfactants derived from palm and coconut resources also have a sizeable land-use impact. However, the alternative is to use petrochemicals, which have a greater carbon impact. Laundry detergents frequently contain a mixture of both types of surfactant. Only three kinds of general laundry detergent have earned [Environmental Working Group verification](#) : AspenClean, Blueland, and healthynest.

Packaging

Assuming that people can resist the urge to overpour liquid detergent (using [more detergent does not clean better](#)), a packaging analysis showed that conventional pourable HDPE bottles have less environmental impact than packaging systems with pods in all impact categories except ecotoxicity. Liquidless laundry soap in [plastic-free packaging](#) was not part of the study, but almost certainly would have been the clear winner. Biodegradable, liquidless laundry sheets like [Earth Breeze](#) come in plastic-free, recyclable packaging; weigh less to transport; and are approved for use in high-efficiency washers. Unfortunately, laundry sheets are still quite a bit more expensive than most liquid laundry detergents.

Best Choice

If you can afford them, a product like [Blueland laundry tabs](#) might be the best choice. They are EWG verified and don't come individually wrapped like the pods in the packaging LCA. For those washing clothes on a budget, an [EWG-rated](#), concentrated liquid detergent in a conventional plastic bottle is the surprising next best choice.

Regardless of which detergent you use, use it sparingly, according to the manufacturer's instructions and wash your clothes in cold water. When it's [time to replace](#) your washer and dryer, choose the most efficient models you can. That will reduce your impact more than a lifetime of using eco-detergents.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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