

Is the method or "washes" used to get the worn-in look on jeans harmful?  
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Ask Eartha Steward

BY EARTHA ANGELS  
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Is the method or "washes" used to get the worn-in look on jeans harmful?

- Gail Reffel, Arvada

The lax environmental and labor laws south of our border encouraged many U.S. jeans companies to relocate their factories there in the early 90s. The Mexican city of Tehuacan, which was once the Mexican mecca for spas and mineral water, is now packed with over 200 jean manufacturers.

It is not just the strange sight of brightly blue colored water flowing where once crystal clear water rippled in streambeds that is disheartening, but the fact that the blue waters are so incredibly toxic that when used to irrigate farms the seedlings are burned and the earth sterilized.

Clearly it is hard to support a family when farming on sterilized lands, forcing many farmers and their families to turn to work in the factories. And as you can guess, this is your typical sweatshop scenario. Workers are forced to meet such ridiculous quotas, during their 12-hour shifts that many suffer from repetitive motion injuries, eyesight problems, back strain and worse. Additionally, the dryers, heaters and ovens used to "finish" the jeans release toxic fumes with no regard to the health of the workers in the factory. It goes without saying that the workers are grossly underpaid, overworked and disrespected.

Indigo is the natural plant dye once used to make jeans blue, but long ago a toxic chemical imitation was substituted. The chemicals, such as potassium permanganate (which was once used to perform illegal abortions) are added in large quantities and paired with the use of sandpaper, pumice stones and grinders to remove large amounts of the blue dye to make the jeans look used and feel soft. In other words, horrible chemicals are added to make jeans blue, and then more horrible chemicals are added to make them look not so blue!

On top of all of this, the Mexican government does not require the factories to filter their outgoing water. The cheapest option is to dump the unfiltered water into nearby streams and that is exactly what happens at the majority of the factories.

As I write this I find myself reflecting on the history of jeans. When did they go from being the worker's inexpensive, strong option for hardworking work clothes to being the fashionista's designer choice for showing off her booty to the boy's at the local club on Saturday night? Don't get me wrong, my jeans are my favorite pair of pants in my closet too. But never again will I buy new jeans that have withstood numerous chemical treatments to look old.

That doesn't mean that those of us in the know have to go without our jeans. We actually have many options. We can always go to thrift stores and find jeans that someone else has broken in for us. There is the option of buying fair trade, organic jeans, which I actually find to be cheaper than many of the pairs of designer jeans in the chi-chi stores out there. The best resource for those is FairIndigo.com. The jeans they sell are made by women in a village in Costa Rica that earn a fair wage and get (gasp!) vacation time.

And if you really are into the fashionista scene you probably already know that it is now chic to buy "dry" or "raw" jeans and break them in yourself.

"Dry" and "raw" denim is such that hasn't had any treatments added to soften or lighten the colors of the denim. I would imagine that these are not made from organic cotton and that natural indigo dyes aren't being utilized, but at least you skip a few rounds of chemical treatments.

Here is the process for breaking in these jeans properly: Wear them as much as possible and don't wash them for at least six months. The companies selling them claim that washing them locks in the color and wrinkles and that jeans are not properly broken in until at least six months of use has passed. The advantage, from the fashion perspective, is that each wrinkle and wear spot is unique to you and that the jeans will fit you like a glove. And these jeans will last a really, really long time.

Before I close I must mention how to care for your jeans in the most eco-friendly way. The French government honestly commissioned a study on this. They found that the washing, drying and ironing (only in France would someone iron their jeans!) accounted for 47 percent of the environmental impacts of jeans over their lifetime. The 240 kWh used for that care each year is the equivalent of powering 4,000 lightbulbs for an hour. The French researchers recommend wearing jeans twice a week, only washing them after five uses, and letting them air dry. And skip the iron. And who the heck washes their jeans after each use anyway?

Eartha Steward is written by Carly Wier, Holly Loff and Beth Orstad, consultants on all things eco and chic at the High Country Conservation Center, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to waste reduction and resource conservation in our mountain community. Eartha believes that you can walk gently on our planet, even if you're wearing style shoes.

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