



knitting & crochet



'Flat' knitting with two needles.

what are they?

They're ways of making 'stretchy' fabric with loops of yarn. Before knitting there was no stretchy fabric - so no socks (you need the stretchiness to get your feet in). Any stretchy fabric is knitted (or crocheted) - e.g. T-shirts (made on machines that do microscopic knitting); sweatshirts; socks; scarves etc. Knitting is a worldwide phenomenon - often to earn some extra cash, and in the West it's a fast-growing hobby, with yarn and fibre festivals popping up all over the place. Most knitted garments for sale are produced by machine, but hand-knitting is making a comeback.

Knitting vs crochet: knitting is done using two or more needles; crochet is done using one hook. Crocheted fabric is not as stretchy as knitted fabric, and is done one loop at a time rather than with a series of loops on the needle. With crochet, the result can be a bulkier fabric, so maybe not so good for socks. In the end it's down to personal preference. Some people find knitting easier, some crochet, but being able to do one doesn't help with the other, as they are so different.

History: knitting is a relatively recent invention compared to weaving. The oldest surviving artefacts are from 11th century Egypt - generally considered to be the birthplace of knitting, although it's difficult to be sure, as textiles don't last too well. The complexity of the Egyptian pieces seem to indicate that knitting is much older than this, however. Nahlbinding was a technique using a single needle to produce fabric - a bit like sewing. It probably developed in several places at the same time, and is considered the precursor of true knitting.

Knitting entered Europe with Muslims in Spain in the Middle Ages, and from there it spread worldwide. Knitting was particularly big in Scotland, and various types of knitted jumpers were an important part of the economy.

Fishermen's jumpers utilised the natural oils in the wool to keep fishermen warm. Often villages would have their own unique pattern, with the fisherman's initials in the hem. If a body was washed up on a beach, it could be identified by the pattern and initials on the jumper.

Techniques & materials: there are two basic techniques - side to side or round and round - with many variations in conventions, traditions, stitch patterns and in ways of constructing garments. Tubular knitting, using 4 or 5 needles, is probably the earliest form. Non-tubular / flat knitting is done with 2 needles - one in each hand, with a knob on the end to stop the yarn slipping off.

There's a huge range of techniques. Fair Isle sweaters are produced quickly using long, double-pointed needles and a knitting belt around the waist, with a leather pad on the front with holes in. Different surface designs, such as Aran sweater patterns, are made using cabling (groups of stitches crossed over each other), which makes the sweater thicker and keeps the wearer warmer. There are particular traditions such as Icelandic knitting, using thick single yarns and classic colour patterns on sweater yokes; and there are various ways of knitting socks, mittens and other specific garments. Lace knitting creates holes by doing 'yarn-overs' to make a lacey open pattern. Acrylic is probably the cheapest fibre to use, but we'd urge you not to use it because of the high environmental impact of its manufacture. Natural fibres include wool (from sheep or other species such as alpacas), flax, hemp or even bamboo.

Size of needles: needles come in a range of sizes - generally if you're using thicker wool or want a lacier, more open texture, use bigger ones. If you're knitting socks or anything with finer yarns or tight fabric, use smaller needles. There's also 'big knitting' or 'giant knitting' that uses enormous needles or even broom handles to produce extremely chunky and cosy blankets and rugs.



'Tubular' knitting with four needles to make socks.



what are the benefits?

Environmental: you can make your own clothes sustainably with traceable raw materials, or buy from someone locally who does the same (imagine knowing the names of the people who made our clothes). This is especially the case with handspun wool from local fleece. Support local sheep farmers by buying wool produced in your country - or use locally-grown plant-based yarns like hemp. This reduces transport distances pollution, carbon emissions and resource use. Using 100% natural yarns prevents microscopic synthetic fibres from washing textiles affecting water quality in oceans and killing aquatic life.

Social / personal: knitters can go anywhere and find like-minded people, there are so many knitting groups worldwide. It's good for conversation, as we listen better when our hands are busy. It's relaxing too, and there's evidence that knitting is good for mental health and general well-being. Knitting your clothes is cheaper than buying good-quality natural garments, although it's not necessarily cheaper than buying poor-quality, synthetic ones - but your clothes will look a lot better for a lot longer, and you won't be contributing to the environmental problems mentioned above, or the profits of corporate textile sweatshops. You don't need much kit either - just needles, which makes it an ideal activity to do whilst travelling. [NB: many airlines don't let you on board with knitting needles, especially metal ones. Crochet hooks are easier. However, as an environmental organisation, the only advice we could give is not to fly.]



Crocheting using a hook rather than needles.

what can I do?

Visit a local yarn shop to ask if they have classes. A lot of them do nowadays, or they might know local groups that you can join. See our website for sources of free patterns, courses etc.

We're of course going to advise you to go as natural as possible. This might mean that your clothes end up more expensive than corporate, synthetic garments, but they won't contribute to ecological damage, sweatshops or corporate profits. You'll need to source local woollen or plant-based yarns. You can find them online. Most Merino wool is from Australia, and there are issues with cruelty in its production as the sheep have extra folds of skin on their rumps that are often cut without anaesthetic (it's called mulesing). It's possible to get Merino wool that's produced humanely, but it's expensive and has still travelled a long way, unless you live in a country that produces it. It's better to buy wool that's produced in your country. In the UK, Blue-faced Leicester, Shetland, Wensleydale, Mohair (from the hair of Angora goats) and yarn from other local producers are good options.

You might want to go further and spin and/or dye yarn, and if you keep sheep, the Natural Fibre Company is a wool processor for small producers of wool - even one fleece. It's washed, carded and spun, and you get yarn back. It deals with alpaca fleece too, as does the Border Mill.

If you have a local knitting group or yarn shop, or a friend or family member who knits, you'll be able to get help whatever level you're working at.

Finally, see the Knitting & Crochet Guild website for advice if you're thinking of buying a knitting machine.

resources

- lowimpact.org/knitting-crochet: info, courses, links, books, including:
- Anna Wilkinson, *Learn to Knit, Love to Knit*
- Patmore & Haffenden, *the Knitting Book*
- Ann Budd, *Knitting Green*
- Pauline Turner, *Beginner's Guide to Crochet*
- kcguild.org.uk - Knitting & Crochet Guild
- ukhandknitting.com - UK Handknitting Assoc.
- knitty.com - lots of free patterns
- knittinghelp.com - learn to knit with free videos
- crochetpatterncentral.com: crochet patterns

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