

GUIDE FOR USERS OF FLEECE

UNWASHED AND UNSCOURED FLEECE – INFORMATION FOR SPINNERS, DYERS AND FELTERS

BACKGROUND

The risks include *Chemical Contamination* and *Transmission of Disease*.

Contact with untreated fleece should be minimised and handlers must observe high standards of personal hygiene. Effective washing or scouring of fleeces will reduce or eliminate most health risks. These are the best safeguards against the potential hazard from chemicals used on sheep before shearing. The risk is considered to be low. The Health and Safety Executive advise that sheep are not sheared for a minimum of three months after dipping, and in practice this period is often longer.

Diseases affecting sheep (or organisms, toxins or endotoxins carried by them) are capable of transmission to humans. Examples of transmissible risks include:

- The causative organisms *streptococci* and *staphylococci*: from boils or infected spots of the skin.
- *E.coli* infections: 'Coliform' is a generic title for a family of organisms that assist natural digestive process in a specific species of animal. For ease of identification organisms bearing the same characteristics and life style are known by reference numbers, of which 1057 is well known. When large numbers of coliforms are transmitted to another species (including humans) by contaminated food, contact with excreta or poor hygiene practices, gastro intestinal infection may result
- *Cryptosporidiosis*: less common is diarrhoea caused by the *cryptosporidiosis* organism which may be contracted from live infected animals, their excreta or contaminated water.
- Q fever: there have been rare examples of Q fever transmitted to humans from infected fleece.
- Anthrax: a very rare but severe and persistent infection which can be transmitted from infected wool or alpaca fleece to humans.
- Ringworm: the ringworm parasite may be transmitted from affected wool to humans. The cause, a spore-bearing organism, can live dormant in the earth for periods in excess of one hundred years.

The risk of transmission is small and depends on several factors – the condition of the fleece, contact time, standards of personal hygiene. Guilds, and their individual members, must be aware of these risks and their 'duty of care' to themselves and other craftspersons, their family and other contacts.

SUMMARY

The following 'Code of Practice' is suggested, with the principal caution as stated in point one.

Guild members as individuals or working in groups using untreated fleece must be aware of the risks and balance these against the perceived advantages in their decision and practice.

Guidelines are given for the washing and/or scouring of fleece. Observing each point will not guarantee protection from risk but will show awareness and a responsible concern for health and safety.

CODE OF PRACTICE: MAIN FEATURES

1. **Unwashed and/or unscoured fleece should not be used on public demonstrations.**
2. All spinners and felters must be aware of the health risks to those working with unwashed or unscoured natural fleece. Untreated fleece should only be used in exceptional circumstances where the end result can justify the practice. Those involved must be aware of the risks to themselves and to their immediate environment. **Pregnant women, those with allergic reactions and/or respiratory problems e.g. asthma, bronchitis, and skin complaints may aggravate these conditions by working with unwashed/unscoured fleece. Those receiving chemotherapy, radiation therapy or taking immune suppressant drugs must avoid all contact with unprocessed fleece.**
3. Precautions:
 1. Whenever possible fleece should be obtained from disease free animals and flocks. Wool should be handled within four months of 'dipping' or similar chemical treatment.
 2. Heavily soiled fleeces, or those containing loose soil or particles, should not be handled in confined spaces. Handle fleece carefully to avoid releasing debris into the air. Avoid handling the buttock region particularly if it is heavily soiled.
 3. Babies and young children should not have access to areas where treated fleece are being stored, washed or scoured.
 4. Wash, rinse and dry hands (and arms if exposed) before and after processing untreated fleece and visits to the toilet. Avoid scratching or touching the lips or any skin whilst treating the fleece.
 5. Do not prepare or consume food or drink in the work area until the processes involving fleece are complete and the area cleared and thoroughly cleaned and allowed to dry.
 6. Healthy spinners, dyers and felters should protect themselves during washing and scouring by
 - covering all skin lesions – cuts burns, bites, abrasions – with adhesive dressing
 - wearing a protective (preferably washable or waterproof) apron
 - wearing household gloves whenever possible.
 7. A mask worn over the nose and mouth offers some additional protection when dealing with dry or dusty fleece.
4. The procedure for washing/scouring fleece:
 1. The work area should be cleared of all unwanted items. Worktops or the floor on which the fleece is laid out should be covered with paper or other disposable sheeting.

2. The sink, baths or receptacles must be large enough to accommodate the fleece.
3. The soap/detergent or scouring agent is added and mixed into the water to make a solution of the strength and temperature recommended by the manufacturer avoiding splashing. Containers of washing/scouring agents must be sealed after use and returned to a safe storage place.
4. The fleece must be completely submerged beneath the surface of the solution. Careful positioning will release any entrapped air and ensure a consistent effect.
5. Washing or scouring must be followed by one or more rinses in clear water no hotter than the original solution. Again careful positioning will ensure a consistent effect.
6. The rinsed fleece may be drained and allowed to dry.
7. Sinks, receptacles and tanks should be cleaned with detergent, rinsed and dried before further use.
8. Protective coverings should be disposed of, or if reusable, washed and dried for further use.
9. Thoroughly clean the work area, allow to dry and maximise ventilation.
10. Remove and clean any reusable protective clothing. Single use items can be disposed of before washing all exposed skin surfaces to reduce any reaction to splashes of chemicals, debris or organisms.

FURTHER NOTES

- Any ill effects following washing or scouring fleece – gastro-intestinal disturbance, skin reaction or respiratory distress affecting you or others in the environment – should be reported to a GP **without delay**.
- Further technical advice about the possible risks and the procedure for handling fleece may be obtained from your regional office of the Health and Safety Executive. **Anyone involved with 'unwashed' fleece should have a tetanus injection, and keep it up-to-date (10 yearly).**
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