

Transcript: EP 326 - Can Toxic Fabric Impact My Health (and My Kids Health)? with
Alexandra Ulmer

Alexandra: People come out of the woodwork to give you a blanket when you're pregnant, and they're usually polyester or traditional cotton, both of which absorb stains like a magnet. So we've provided a functional solution, only needs to be washed once a year. You can dab off milk stains and just get on with your life, and they're just really soft and cozy and made with a lot of love.

Dr. Taz: Hi everyone, and welcome to Super Woman Wellness. I'm Dr. Taz. I've made it my mission throughout my career in integrative medicine to support women in restoring their health using a blend of eastern medical wisdom with modern science. In this show, I will guide you through different practices to find your power type and fully embody the healthiest and most passionate version of you. I'm here for you and I can't wait to get started. This is a Soulfire Production.

Welcome back everyone. Welcome back to another episode of Super Woman Wellness, where we're determined to bring you back to your super powered self. I've been going a bit blue in the face recently talking about toxins and your toxic load, and the impact on your health and the health of your unborn child and all this other business. But I brought somebody in to help me because I'm probably starting to sound like gibberish. So with me today is Alexandra Ulmer. She's the founder of AU Baby. She knows Knits and Textiles. She's an entrepreneur on a mission to clean up toxic textiles, think baby blankets, all the stuff we use. She founded AU Baby to bring the world's first purely plant dye, functional fiber, baby blanket to market. With over a decade of knit design experience in luxury fashion, and as a material innovator and performance sports with Nike in the past, she's now turned her attention from the catwalk to the crib.

AU Baby is a clean, sustainable baby blanket collection that marries Alexandra's passions for sustainability, wellness, and textile design. She's born on the prairie, we've got to talk about that. Alexandra migrated from Oklahoma City to London to study. I am thrilled to have you on the show. Welcome. I can't wait to hear your story. What in the world. How do you go from the prairie to London, from Nike to baby blankets? What's going on here?

Alexandra: Well, I just want to say thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to get into this conversation and to get to know your listeners. Oh, where to begin? I mean, I grew up in Oklahoma City. I like to say pre-internet, not really pre-internet, but essentially. And I was one of those teenagers who just had that singular focus about wanting to be a fashion designer, so cue the eye roll. It's such a common dream. But I got my British Vogues out at Barnes and Noble, and I read about this design school and I just applied myself and I told myself if I got

in, then I had to go. So that's what precipitated the move to London at age 18 from Oklahoma.

Dr. Taz: Wow. I can't imagine.

Alexandra: Just to give you a little bit of a specimen, I've lived in New York and LA, now been in Portland for almost eight years, and there's a lot of people who have never met anyone from Oklahoma. So I'm proud to be a little bit of a specimen too.

Dr. Taz: What was that transition like? I have to ask. From 18 to go literally from the Prairie to London, what was that transition like?

Alexandra: Well, I had always wanted to live in a big city, so I spent a couple summers in New York studying at Parsons and NYU and things like that. It wasn't as if I had never traveled before and it was my first time in a big city. But at the same time, I don't think anything can really prepare you exactly for that real gritty London experience, which is very different from stopping for tea in Piccadilly Circus on your trip. Yeah, it's different, but I loved it and I wouldn't change that experience for the world.

Dr. Taz: I love London. I think it's such a vibrant city. But I know my listeners are like, why do you have a fashion person on your wellness show? So talk to us about your experience in the fashion world. What did you observe there? I mean, you were a heavyweight in that world, so what did you observe there and what made you turn ultimately towards this different take on everything?

Alexandra: Absolutely. So I'm going to have to start back at the beginning because as a teenager I was into fashion. But as a young, young child, I was the most inspired by my father who was a neurosurgeon. I come from an extremely medical family. A very small family, but almost everyone is an MD. My mom was a nurse, got family doctors, rheumatologists, cardiologists. I grew up in that environment in which I was fascinated by the human body, by our ability to heal under the right circumstances. And of course, very inspired by my father, who is a hero saving lives every day. I would accompany him on his hospital rounds as a little girl. I doubt that would be allowed anymore, but I used to visit his patients in the ICU. I wanted to be a neurosurgeon, like full stop. Fast-forward, my dad got diagnosed with ALS and he passed away after being on life support for almost four years.

So you can imagine how it was too painful for me at that time to go into the medical field because we had the hospice in our home, and fashion design was a way for me to escape that and to apply my creativity in a different way. So now full circle, coming back to learning about how textiles impact our health, how we

can reduce our toxic load by not only the products that we choose to apply to our skin, but the fabrics that we wear. I am the first person to say, it's taken me a long time to figure this out, and I have been in this niche world for over a decade. I have a degree in knitwear design, and I've been working in the industry since then, but even I didn't really put two and two together about how polyesters made of plastic.

We need to get it out of our baby's cribs, first of all. We need to get it off of our hot bodies when we're sweating and working out and all these things. So I just want to say for your listeners who are navigating the marketplace trying to avoid toxins, please do not feel bad that it's so complicated and we're all doing our best. My goal for this conversation is to provide a very easy framework for them to take away when they're shopping for everyday fabrics for themselves and their families. So I think that answers your question, how it ties all together.

Dr. Taz: I get it. And I think that is what I hear from everyone, that they maybe understand the concept of the toxic load and its impact on our health and wellness, but how do you bite this off? So I feel like the food part, people are starting to get and understand they're buying organic. Even cleaning products and beauty products, there's more awareness around what's clean and what's not clean. Textiles, I don't think have really been pushed to the forefront. Now for me, in practice, you probably already know this story, but I'm in Atlanta, so we see... This is open knowledge, so I don't think I'm bashing anyone that everyone doesn't already know about. But we see a lot of Delta people, a lot of Delta employees. I don't know if you heard the whole story with the purple uniform. Are you familiar with that?

Alexandra: No.

Dr. Taz: Oh my gosh. Okay, so they switched to a purple uniform, was maybe about five or six years ago. And rapidly everyone started getting sick and people were coming through the practice with new onset autoimmune diseases, new hormone stuff, and they didn't know what it was. Finally everyone put together it was the purple uniform because there was formaldehyde in the fabric. So they finally changed it, changed the manufacturer, all that other stuff, and it's a big deal over at Delta. But that's just a very small example of how what we put on our skin, which is our largest organ of the body, that's impacting our overall health. You mentioned polyester. What does the science say? Is there science now linking some of this together or is it not quite serious?

Alexandra: Absolutely.

Dr. Taz: Okay, tell us a little bit about it.

Alexandra: There have been studies coming out showing that BPA is essentially off-gassing from the polyester and does absorb into the skin. So you might be familiar with some of the statistics about how high levels of BPA from receipt paper are absorbent to our skin. That is one of the biggest exposures that people have to extremely high levels of BPA. So when you get a receipt, just say no thanks, or just don't hang onto it. It's the same thing with polyester fabric. So something that most people don't realize is that polyester is chemically the same as plastic. That is why you've probably seen a lot of these green campaigns from major fashion brands saying, "Hey, we're using recycled bottles to make this outerwear. We're using recycled bottles to make this and that." It is because it is chemically the same as a plastic water bottle. So can you imagine tucking your child in at night with 20 plastic water bottles on them? That's literally what polyester fleece is.

Not only that, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, because there is a light at the end of the tunnel, but it goes deeper than that because it's not only toxic to humans, it's incredibly toxic to the environment. And the microplastics within the fabric are shedding into our water. They're not filtered by the sewage systems, and they're getting absorbed and eaten by small fish, which you can imagine just impacts the entire food chain. So we're not only wearing the plastic, we're washing it and we're releasing the microplastics into our waterways and then ingesting it through various forms. So the first key is knowledge and awareness. I am not saying to your listeners, you need to go home and get rid of all of your stuff and all of your kids' favorite stuffed animals.

No, any progress is a good thing. So let's not be too hard on ourselves because as you just mentioned, people navigating the marketplace, the onus is on us as consumers, and we have to educate ourselves. So it's a lot of pressure. So let's just all take a deep breath and look at labels when you shop. Look for natural materials, try to prioritize natural materials. Those would be things that our grandparents wore most of the time. Things like cotton and wool linen, maybe an alpaca blend. Try to avoid polyester in sleepwear and try to avoid polyester, especially on a base layer against your skin. It's pretty hard to avoid an outerwear because it's so durable and cheap. So when you think of a puffy jacket for your kids, that doesn't bother me. Having a favorite stuffed animal, whether it's Elmo or a favorite teddy bear that's polyester, I'm not too worried about that either. But let's be smart about how we prioritize the natural fibers against our skin and for prolonged periods.

Dr. Taz: So when you're talking about prolonged skin, so nightwear, underwear, bras?

Alexandra: Underwear, yes. And it's funny because an OB will say, oh, you should wear cotton underwear. But people aren't getting the full holistic view, which is not only is cotton breathable and healthier for us, but also polyester is plastic, and we probably shouldn't be wearing it against our skin at all.

Dr. Taz: Right.

Hi, it's Dr. Taz here. All right, let's be real. We're going to be honest for a second. It's all about the hair, right? At least that's what I was told by my mother and my mother-in-law when I was losing my hair rapidly. Look, hair loss is real. It's an epidemic. So many women are suffering from it today, and it can knock out your self-esteem in about five seconds. I've been there, getting dressed with the lights off, not wanting to go out even when I was only in my twenties. Lush Locks is my formula in my product line, The EastWest Way, which really addresses hair loss by merging together eastern and western medicine, true to The EastWest Way philosophy.

In Lush Locks, there are methylated B vitamins, magnesium, iron, all of which has been shown to promote healthy hair. But the key is that this particular patented formula also contains the Ayurvedic herbs Amla, which have been shown to help regrow hair, improve blood flow to the scalp, and the Chinese herb Foti, which has been used for centuries in Chinese medicine for hair regeneration and hair regrowth. By putting all of these together with additional micronutrients, Lush Locks is the one supplement I can't live without. In fact, I would take it with me if I was stranded on an island.

It works beautifully to help regenerate and regrow hair and prevent further hair loss. I encourage all of you to give Lush Locks a try. In fact, just this month, if you go to theeastwestway.com, type in the code SWW30, you'll get 30% off your purchase of Lush Locks. That includes the supplement, along with the shampoo and conditioner that's also a part of my hair loss line. Look, hair loss is real. It impacts us all. It doesn't have to be that way. Try out Lush Locks. Use your code. And don't forget if you rate and review any episode of the podcast and email me at hello@drtaz.com, I'll send you a free bottle of Lush Locks or Boost, you get to choose. Just make sure you email me and we'll take it from there.

So moving to our children, moving to the babies and young children and things like that. Again, going back to now we have babies. They have a lot of skin, they're in blankets all the time. What's happening there with their exposure to polyester or to some of these materials and their health? Has there been any science connecting those two things together? And babies, by the way, have much more sensitive, more permeable skin.

Alexandra: Exactly. That is another really good point is that babies under two, they have 30% thinner skin than an adults. So they are extra, for other reasons as well, vulnerable to all forms of environmental toxins, but also more vulnerable to toxins absorbed through the skin based on permeability. So that's an important thing to, budget wise if you're going to prioritize organic cotton PJs, then do it for the newborn and under two. I did see a study that was showing BPA in infant socks, which is terrifying because we know that BPA is a known endocrine disruptor. It can disrupt multiple systems within the body. We also know that polyester is a known carcinogen as well. So just to keep things simple for parents, study labels, look for natural materials, and it might be helpful to just do a quick 101 on what is a natural material, if you'd like to do that.

Dr. Taz: Let's do that because I think everyone's so confused and we can't be pure, right? We can't be completely toxin free. So what is natural? We go to the store, what are we looking for?

Alexandra: Sure, so a natural fiber is essentially a plant or animals based fiber, because it can be based on cellulose or protein, but it's found in nature in its fiber state and that's the key. So think about wool, think about cotton or linen. Those are existing in nature in their fiber state, and they're going to be minimally processed to be turned into a yarn that either gets woven into a fabric or knitted into a fabric. Then you have synthetic fibers on the other hand, which are all man-made with varying degrees of chemistry that were not popular or didn't even exist before the 1940s essentially. So you have things like polyester, which goes by multiple names such as acrylic or polyamide. One thing that just blows my mind is you go into a craft store, to the yarn store, try to find a natural fiber yarn in a major craft store. The majority, I want to say 95% are going to be polyester acrylic.

Why? Because it's cheap and it's soft. It's actually incredibly easy to extrude this plastic and texturize it in the spinning process to make it feel softer than a lower quality natural fiber. So we've all gotten really accustomed to very plushy, very soft plastic. Okay, back to natural fiber versus synthetic. Then we have a family of synthetic fibers, which are sometimes referred to as semi-synthetic, which sound natural, but they're not. Things like bamboo. So this is a big eyeopener for parents because the baby market is flooded with bamboo, which is buttery soft, very affordable compared to a fabric like maybe Pima cotton or Merino, what we work with at AU Baby. So bamboo, I'm not saying all bamboo is terrible, but think about what bamboo is like in it's natural state. It's a very rigid and tough material. In order to turn it into a super soft fabric, it has to be put into a very harsh solvent bath, and we're talking chemicals and acids like sulfuric acid.

That is the process by which most viscous fabrics are made. So you take a wood pulp or a bamboo pulp, and you are essentially melting it into something you can extrude and turn into a soft fabric. So there's your 101. If it's found in its fiber state in nature, it's a natural fiber. If it's not, it's synthetic.

Dr. Taz: When you read a label, which should the label say? Yeah, I'm going to the store-

Alexandra: The label will tell you the content of the fabric. Let's say it says 95% cotton, 5% spandex. Well, you might not know exactly what spandex is, but you probably know that it's not found in nature. So if you're looking for 100% natural fiber, you might want to avoid it. If you're okay with that, that might be fine for you. But again, just prioritizing natural fibers for the base layer. So let's say you're shopping for your kids sweaters in the wintertime, and you go to a Zara or a store like that, and you're not really finding any cotton or wool sweaters. They're usually mostly synthetic because they are so much softer, so that's just something to keep in mind.

Dr. Taz: So one thing that comes to mind, and some of this is just influenced by many of the headlines right now, but with manufacturing that's not here in the US and if a lot of this stuff is being made overseas, how is there quality control about what people or what manufacturers are saying is in it versus what's not in it? You know what I mean? What's the regulation around that? I'm happy to go buy cotton blankets and natural blanket and all that other stuff, I'm happy to do that. But how do we know it is what it is?

Alexandra: Right. I mean, that's such a good question. So as we mentioned, I own a clean, sustainable baby blanket collection called AU Baby and we use 100% fully traceable, responsible wool standard, purely plant dyed extra fine Merino wool. So it's plant dyed in Italy with only plant materials, zero chemicals, zero metal fixatives, and they're knitted in Los Angeles. So we have a 100% transparent supply chain. And you can go to our website and check out our QR code to follow our wools journey, which is really fun. But as we just talked about, when you're shopping for your family and you're looking at a tag that 100% cotton or that 50% acrylic is not even telling you the ingredients in that fabric.

You can't really find out anything about how it's dyed, and there's no way to healthfully dye polyester because the actual dyes that fixed a polyester are also very toxic. So one way is just to use the framework we described already, which is prioritize natural, but you can also look for certifications such as OEKO-TEX STANDARD and the GOTS certification. Are you familiar with either of those?

Dr. Taz: No.

Alexandra: So that would be something that you would see on a hang tag. So, OEKO-TEX STANDARD 100 tests for hundreds of known toxins in fabric. So you can actually find a bamboo fabric that even though it's synthetic and maybe it's not as pure as an extra fine Merino, if it is OEKO-TEX STANDARD certified, you'll at least know that it has no residues of any toxins on it. And these are pretty common, widespread certifications that are relatively easy to find in the marketplace. Even at places like Buy Buy Baby will have OEKO-TEX STANDARD certified cotton.

Dr. Taz: Gotcha. What is your impression of the industry? Do you think everything is moving in this direction? Where do we-

Alexandra: No, absolutely not. I think that the average person doesn't know, doesn't understand. So we hear like, "Oh, fast fashion is bad for the planet" or "Fast fashion is maybe not great" but it's hard to-

Dr. Taz: It's like fast food.

Alexandra: It's hard to conceptualize, because I read recently that the United States makes 16 million tons of textile waste a year, 16 million tons. And every second, a garbage truck, essentially, full of fast fashion is either incinerated or sent to the landfill. So it's hard to conceptualize the vastness of that type of pollution. And to think that the majority of the synthetic fibers, they don't biodegrade, they're going to last for 200 years or so in the landfill. So no one wants our waste. I think some other countries have made clear that they don't want to import our textile waste anymore, so we really need to wake up. And the next part of the framework is buy less, buy better. So natural fibers are more expensive to produce than synthetic. They are more expensive. It is easy in our mindset, our consumer mindset, is, oh, sticker shock. But if we buy less, then we can buy better and we can prioritize spending those dollars for a quality product that's going to last longer for us and be healthier for us and the environment.

Dr. Taz: That's such an un-American idea, right, I feel like. But it's shifting. I do feel like there's a cultural-

Alexandra: It is shifting.

Dr. Taz: I think it's shifting. I think 20, 30 years ago it was more, more, more, have more stuff, whatever that meant. And now I feel like attention to ingredients, to labels, to quality. I think people are realizing less is more, and that might be kind of the way forward.

Alexandra: Perhaps, especially with inflation too. I mean, maybe people are buying less, but maybe they're being more conscientious about where they're putting their dollars.

Dr. Taz: Totally. Well, tell us a little bit more AU baby. So baby blankets, that you make. Tell us a little bit about what's happening there.

Alexandra: Sure. So I launched AU Baby just a couple years ago as a passion project while I was working full-time at Nike. They're essentially the first clean, sustainable, baby blanket collection that provides real performance benefits for babies. So obviously with my sports performance background, I had to create a blanket that actually provided babies with real benefits. Our fabric is the only one scientifically proven to help babies sleep better, to be microbe and stain resistant, and also to be beneficial for their skin. So you're probably aware of this, but up to one in four babies today in the United States has eczema and it is sometimes a chronic and very difficult condition to navigate. Our material is therapeutic for those eczema babies because of the sweat-wicking and the temperature control that's built in. They're also hypoallergenic and they're an exact protein match to our own skin.

So I've just basically completely nerded out and just reinvented the baby blanket category. It's so exciting because it's an essential item for babies. Every baby gets a blanket and people come out of the woodwork to give you a blanket when you're pregnant. They're usually polyester or traditional cotton, both of which absorb stains like a magnet. So we've provided a functional solution, only needs to be washed once a year. You can dab off milk stains with a damp cloth and just get on with your life. They're just really soft and cozy and made with a lot of love.

Dr. Taz: Oh my goodness. I'm going to have to check them out. So are there other products in the AU Baby line or is it mainly baby blankets right now?

Alexandra: We've launched with what we call our classics collection, and they're made in Los Angeles at a woman-owned factory. We are hoping to expand our line, but we are a self-funded startup, so right now we're just building out our inventory for the year and hope to expand our product offering for adults soon and adding some baby apparel as well. But I can't give you an exact date on those, so you'll have to join us on Instagram, sign up for our newsletter and stay tuned.

Dr. Taz: I love it. What is your Instagram handle just in case people are jotting things down?

Alexandra: Yeah, it's A.U.Baby, so AU Baby.

Dr. Taz: Wonderful. Since you've entered the baby space, which is already... There's so much stuff, right? There's so many gadgets. There's so much information. I think a lot of moms really do want to embrace this holistic path to taking care of their babies. I know we've talked about textiles and fabrics. What other advice would you give a new mom in this space trying to navigate all the stuff that's out there, even for herself, for her own health and wellbeing? What kind of advice would you give her?

Alexandra: Absolutely. So I am the knitwear and textile expert, but I am not providing... I'm not the person that has PDFs you can download for these kinds of tips. So I do have some accounts that I can suggest for that who are just the go-to person for all things non-toxic pregnancy. I did a preconception plan. I had an idea, I wasn't sure how long it would take to start a family, but I started thinking about... I got rid of my fake nails and I did a six-month little chemical detox before thinking about that. It was environmental toxins nerd who I looked at for that. She's really great. 3 Little Plums is another account to follow. I saw that she's about to release 150 page organic clothing guide for kids. She has a background in investigative journalism. thetot.com is an awesome marketplace because... We used to sell on there before we went to direct to consumer. But every product on The Tot has to be third party tested for safety.

Dr. Taz: Got it. Gotcha.

Alexandra: Dr. Courtney Kahla is a holistic chiropractor in Dallas, and she has some awesome resources for pregnant folks. So those are the main ones that I would recommend. They have a lot of very holistic, well-rounded information for people.

Dr. Taz: I love that you brought up preconception planning. That's something we actually do in our practice as well, because preconception planning is not just who's your pediatrician going to be and your GYN and all that other stuff, but it really is reducing your chemical load. That's where a lot of it's focused and improving your nutritional load at the same time. So trying to play with both of those ideas, which actually were very rooted in Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine. They would have formulas and herbals to help really build chi or build energy before you're even trying to get pregnant, and then ways of cleaning the body before you're even trying to get pregnant.

But where we can marry science to it, which is so fascinating, is we can test your toxins. We can test your toxic load. We can get a sense of where you are with BPA and organ phosphates and all these things that we talk about, mercury, lead, all this stuff. And get a sense of where you are and help you remove that from the body before you go into actually trying to get pregnant. I think in the current

climate that we're in with climate change, with manufacturing, with all the stuff going on now, it's only becoming more and more apparent that toxicity is kind of the next public health nightmare.

Alexandra: It truly is, and people detox differently from each other.

Dr. Taz: Totally. So I think it's a place where I'm hoping there'll be like... I've been totally ticked off with the whole East Palestine thing with that train, right, because they're talking a lot about the levels in water and air, but they're not talking about how that stuff gets absorbed into the skin, how it gets absorbed in utero, how we can pass it on to our children. Just really, if anything, with this textile conversation, how you have to understand your toxic load and how you have to be very conscious about choosing products that are trying to do right by this, what I think is the next sort of epidemic or pandemic, which is toxins.

Alexandra: Absolutely, and to your point, just the textile component of that has just not been on people's minds. If you're filtering your water, you're trying to choose better, more nutrient dense foods for your family, you're looking at the products you're putting on your skin, it's time to start paying more attention to the fabrics that you're wearing as well.

Dr. Taz: Very much. All right, Alexandra. You know Super Women are on this show all the time, and you are one of them. What is your superpower?

Alexandra: My superpower is my intuition.

Dr. Taz: Ooh, I love that. How has that worked for you?

Alexandra: So it's showed up in different ways throughout different decades of my life and like many superpowers it can be difficult to manage because some days it hits you like a lightning bolt, and other days you might not really want to listen to what it has to say. As I've evolved on my personal journey and just tuning into my intuition and trusting it, it has always steered me in the right direction. So I just encourage listeners to take the time to tune in and listen to your inner voice, because it's always right.

Dr. Taz: That inner voice is always right. You're right, sometimes we want to turn it off, but it usually hurts us if we do so. Well, what a great, enlightening episode. I love learning about this. Thank you so much for taking time to join us today. I really appreciate it and I think everyone now has-

Alexandra: Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Taz: Of course. Everyone has your Instagram handle. Any other place where they can connect with you?

Alexandra: Absolutely. On our website, which is [www.aubabyshop](http://www.aubabyshop.com), that's aubabyshop.com.

Dr. Taz: Wonderful. And for everyone watching and listening to this episode of Super Woman Wellness, share this info, please. Pass it on to a new mom or your sister or your friends. Let people know that this is something we need to be thinking about. All right. I appreciate you guys joining me. I will see you guys next time.