



**REAL
LEATHER.
STAY
DIFFERENT.**

REAL LEATHER.

FROM HIDE TO HANDBAG, LEATHER PRODUCTION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Hides go through a process called tanning to create leather. This improves strength, flexibility and durability and provides material ready to produce a wide variety of products. We have been turning hides into leather for almost 400,000 years. Today, new technologies are drastically cutting water and chemical use ensuring leather is not only a natural product, but a more environmentally friendly one too.

- Approximately 80% of all leather made in the world today is tanned using Chromium III, a metal that is naturally present in drinking water*. Chromium III salts are used to make hides both harder wearing, more water resistant and easier to work with. The salts are flushed from the finished hides before the waste water is cleaned and processed in a procedure that is relatively quick, typically taking just two days to complete. ⁽¹⁾
- Vegetable tanning is a traditional process. It uses naturally occurring materials such as tree bark from pine or oak together with fat liquors to repeatedly soak the hides. A longer process, taking from 20 days to a year, it produces an individual leather that can mould, stretch and breathe. Both Chromium III and vegetable tanning involve the use of chemicals. Since the chemicals and tanning processes are different, each requires different approaches to ensure that materials are sourced properly and waste water cleaning and disposal supports the environment.
- After tanning, and in order to create durable and beautiful products that will stand the test of time, leather can be polished and/or dyed. Chromium tanned leather tends to be softer and more flexible than vegetable tanned leather, so it is more suitable for footwear and clothing. Vegetable tanned leather is more suitable for saddles and harnesses.
- The leather industry is committed to reducing its environmental impact from the use of water and natural and processed chemicals. The independent Leather Working Group awards tanneries Gold, Silver, Bronze or Audited status in conjunction with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and using evaluation criteria developed with WWF and Greenpeace. This enables manufacturers to showcase best practice and encourages continuous improvement. ⁽²⁾
- Water use in leather production has fallen rapidly, dropping by 35% in just 25 years and this trend is continuing. LHCA is commissioning detailed research with independent partners to deliver up-to-date environmental performance data and carbon footprinting for the production process, and whole of life evaluations for a basket of leather goods. ⁽³⁾
- The long lifespan of leather products should be borne in mind when considering its environmental impacts – leather makes goods that stand the test of time.

*It is important to note Chromium (III) is very different to Chromium (VI) which is never used in leather production. Chromium (III) is an essential element in humans but does need to be managed in proper conditions like all chemicals. Chromium (VI) is toxic and can cause respiratory problems and increase the risk of lung cancer. ⁽⁴⁾



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This factsheet is produced by the Leather and Hide Council of America (L&HCA), established to promote the US leather industry which is responsible for a significant proportion of the international trade in hides. The L&HCA works to establish best practice in US leather production and to share this worldwide. Figures quoted refer to the USA unless otherwise stated.

SOURCE:

- (1) <https://www.leatherworkinggroup.com/> and <https://leathernaturally.org/>
- (2) <https://www.leatherworkinggroup.com/>
- (3) L&HCA factsheet
- (4) <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-09/documents/chromium-compounds.pdf> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chromium> and https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/dwg/chemicals/chromium.pdf