



Take a Load Off: Laundry Refresh!

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We all wear clothing and use textiles such as sheets and towels. These items eventually need to be cleaned. Correct? Most refer to this cleaning task (or ritual) as “doing laundry.” And some would argue that there is a right way and a wrong way to complete this chore. Plenty of questions can arise between figuring out how much detergent to use or knowing which washer cycle to choose. You can find answers on care labels, on laundry product packages, and in the washer and dryer user manuals. Therefore, in today’s world of information searching, it’s helpful to have a basic understanding of *what* you are washing, and the products and equipment available.

What are you washing?

Composition

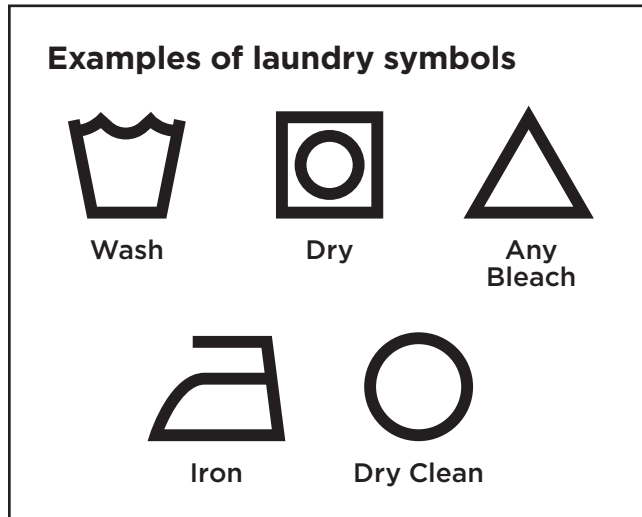
Clothing and textiles are made of fibers and yarns that are either natural (such as cotton or wool) or synthetic/manufactured (such as polyester or nylon). **These natural or synthetic fibers and yarns are woven or knitted into fabrics.** How a fabric “feels” and performs is based on the fiber and yarn type, method of construction (woven or knit), and any applied finishes or treatments. Fabrics are sewn to create clothing and textiles, the construction method (stitches and seams) and any fasteners or embellishments (such as zippers or sequins) impact



the serviceability and durability of the final product. **All these elements determine how to care for and clean the item.**

Care labels

The Federal Trade Commission established the **Care Labeling Rule in 1971** to provide consumers information for washing, bleaching, drying, ironing, and dry cleaning of textile products. The instructions are based on the fiber content, fabric type, method of construction, and finishes. **Following the care label information helps textile products remain serviceable and look newer longer.**



Laundry process

Think and investigate

Not everything needs to be washed after each use. You can reuse or wear lots of clothing and textiles more than once. But let's assume an item is dirty and ready for the laundry. First, check for and **pretreat any stains**. Stain treatment is mentioned in the next section, but the key points are that **it's best to treat stains when they are fresh**, and some stains require different treatments and water temperatures.

Sort it out

Do you need to sort your laundry into specific loads before washing? Ideally, yes, for the best results. The world will not end if you throw all your clothes in the washer together. However, you may end up

with gray, dingy socks (that used to be white), your lightweight shirts may become overrun with tiny holes and fuzzballs (or "pills"), and your towels may take forever to dry. **Sorting helps your clothing and textiles stay newer looking longer and your washer and dryer run more efficiently.** Of course, it may not always be feasible to divide your laundry into smaller loads because of time, money, washer/dryer availability, or other limited resources. Do what works for your situation, and when possible, try to implement the sorting tips below.

Sort by COLOR


- Group items of similar color together, the most common being "whites," "lights," "darks," and "mixed."
- Color transfer sometimes happens in the wash because of loose dye in the water (from new clothes or clothing colored with dyes that are not colorfast).
- **Dye-trapping sheets can be helpful**, but your white towel may still become pink if you wash it with red socks.

Sort by SOIL LEVEL

- Wash "heavily soiled" clothes separately.
- **Too much soil in the wash water can redeposit onto the clothes.**
- Using a high-quality detergent and not overloading the washer will also help.

Sort by FABRIC TYPE and WEIGHT

- Ideally, your jeans and your fancy sweater should not meet up in the washer.
- **Clothing damage caused by abrasion** happens when rough, heavy clothes rub up against delicate, lightweight clothes in the washer and dryer.
- Wash "lint givers" (ex: fleece or towels) separately from "lint receivers" (ex: corduroy or synthetic fabrics).
- Washers and dryers also sense the clothing weight and moisture levels, so washing heavy cotton jeans separately from a lightweight polyester T-shirt is more efficient.



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More prep tips

In addition to sorting by color, soil level, and fabric type, take time to shake off excess dirt, debris, or pet hair. **Close zippers, unbutton buttons,** empty pockets, unroll cuffs, and unbunch socks. Washing clothes inside out will help maintain their appearance. Wash delicate lingerie or textiles in a mesh bag. Again, **read the care label for further instructions.**

Laundry products

Detergents

Simply put, both **soaps** and **detergents** have surfactants which break down and remove dirt and oil. But the additional **synthetic ingredients in detergent** make it a more effective choice for cleaning in cooler water or hard water. On the other hand, **soaps are biodegradable** and gentler on fabrics. Both come in varied formulas and concentrations. Therefore, it is important to **thoroughly read the packaging and instructions** to make the best,

informed choices. Be aware that some detergents are heavy-duty for everyday laundry or heavily soiled items, while some detergents are light-duty for delicate items. Also note if a product is marked “HE” for high efficiency machines. **HE detergents are specially formulated to work in these machines which use lower water levels and higher spin speeds.**

Bleach

For whitening or stain removal power, **bleach is an option when you use it according to the package directions** (and remember to check the item’s care label). Add **chlorine bleach** to a bleach dispenser where it will be diluted and dispensed after the enzymes in the detergent have had time to remove soils. Do not use too much chlorine bleach as it can weaken fabric and cause white fabric to turn yellow. **Oxygen bleach** is more versatile because it’s gentler on clothing, more color-safe, and is more environmentally friendly than its chlorine counterpart. You can add it directly to the washer, before adding the clothes. **Never mix bleach with any other cleaning product or chemical.**

Stain removers

Treat stains promptly for the best results, as the chances for removal decrease once the stain dries. Not all stains are created equal. Therefore, the treatment is based on the type of stain. **Treat oily stains with a liquid detergent or stain pretreatment product** and wash in warm water. **You should soak blood or chocolate stains in cool water** before treating. To complicate matters, the fiber content (such as cotton or polyester) can impact the ease of stain removal. For example, an oily stain is easier to remove from a cotton T-shirt as opposed to a polyester T-shirt. Because of the variables involved, it's best to refer to a complete stain removal guide (available through Cooperative Extension or online at <https://www.cleaninginstitute.org/cleaning-tips/clothes/stain-removal-guide>).

Fabric softeners

Dispensed during the rinse cycle, **liquid fabric softeners** penetrate fabric fibers, smoothing them, giving the item a softer feel. **Dryer sheets**, on the other hand, use the heat and tumbling action in the dryer to coat fabric fibers, reducing static and

wrinkles. Both can add a fragrance if you use a scented variety. **Be careful not to use more than directed**, as towels can become less absorbent, and clothing may feel as if it has a residue. You should not use fabric softener on some items (like athletic wear) so be sure to check the item's care label first.

Formulations

Whether you're using a **laundry pod, powder, sheet, bead, liquid**, or any other formulation, **read the directions**. While each type may come with its own set of advantages and disadvantages, know that anything in **liquid form more readily dissolves** in water (which is a good thing). **Laundry pods and sheets are portable and less messy**, but the dosage may not be as exact. These can be effective on normal laundry but do not always dissolve in cooler, low-water wash cycles. **It may take time to find the product and formulation that works best for your laundry needs and your budget**. Sometimes a more expensive, higher-quality product will save you money in the long run. **Regardless, always keep laundry products in their original packaging and out of reach of children and adults with dementia or cognitive impairment.**



Dosage

More is not always better – and this includes suds! Newer, high efficiency (HE) detergents are concentrated and specifically formulated to produce fewer suds. Therefore, it's important to **know what your washer recommends and also to read the label of any laundry product**. If the container lid has dosage markings, use those as a guide for measuring the quantity needed. Ideally, this ranges from a few *teaspoons* to a couple of *tablespoons*. This amount is based on the load size, soil level, and water hardness. What is considered a small load or a large load? In general, **a small load fills up one-third of the washer and a large load fills up three-quarters of the washer**. Be mindful that washers have different capacities, so a “small load” for some is actually a “large load” for others. Figure your detergent amount based on your needs but remember that using too much detergent can leave clothes feeling sticky, scratchy, or even sour-smelling.

Laundry equipment

Washer basics

Top load, front load, high efficiency...what's the difference? Visit your local appliance store for the most up-to-date information, but here is a brief explanation. **Traditional top-loading machines** have a center agitator that circulates items while they are completely submerged in water. Newer, **high efficiency (HE) top loaders and front loaders tumble items in lower water levels**. You must use HE detergents in HE washers for effective cleaning. HE machines may require longer wash times but can accommodate larger loads and are gentler on clothing. The wash cycle usually sets the water temperature, amount of agitation (wash and spin speed), and the length of wash time. Some washers allow you to customize these. The water level is normally determined by sensing the weight of items while taking into account the selected cycle.

However, most older machines rely on the user to select the water level. **Refer to the washer manual (check online) to clarify the model-specific cycles.**

Using the washer

Do not overload the washer; no shoving or stuffing! Items should be able to move freely to allow for effective dirt removal and rinsing. For **top-load washers**, be sure to place items loosely around the center agitator or wash plate. If there is not an automatic detergent dispenser, add the detergent before adding the clothes, while the water is filling. Most **front-load washers** have dispenser drawers that take the guess work of when and where to add laundry products. But **remember to read the directions on the product**. You should add laundry pods to the wash tub not the dispenser drawer. Use care labels as a guide for selecting the wash cycle, and **adjust the water temperature, cycle time, and spin speed if necessary** (and possible). For the best results, remove clothes from the washer soon after the wash is finished. It's a good idea to **leave the washer lid or door open until the interior has dried** – this helps your washer stay fresh. Read the washer manual for maintenance guidelines and remember that **you need to clean the washer itself occasionally**.

Dryer basics

Dryers use electricity to operate, but the heating source can be either electric or gas. Gas dryers typically cost more and require professional installation but are usually less expensive to operate. Check with your local appliance store for details. Just as with washers, **dryers have varied capacities**. Dryers sold in a pair with a washer will be large enough to dry loads washed in the accompanying washer. But you do not have to buy the matching set, just make sure your dryer is big enough to accommodate your needs. **The dryer cycles determine the heat level, dampness-sensing capabilities, and length of dry time**. Cycles with low

or medium heat are usually “gentler” on items. Too often, we overdry our clothing, leading to shrunken shirts and worn-out elastics. A dryer with an “air fluff” (heat-free) setting is convenient for freshening items you don’t need to wash. **Refer to the dryer manual (check online) to clarify what the model-specific cycles mean.**

Using the dryer

As you remove items from the washer, gently shake and untangle them, as needed; items should not be dripping wet. Loosely place the items in the dryer so they can tumble freely. Select the dryer cycle according to the care labels, limiting long dry times with hot temperatures. When drying mixed loads or bed sheets, **it’s a good idea to periodically check the dryer to make sure items are not bunched together.** To avoid wrinkles, remove clothes from the dryer as soon as the dryer stops. (If you are not putting items in the dryer, lay them flat on a clean towel, place them on a drying rack, or hang them neatly on a hanger to dry.) Make it a habit to **check and clean the lint screen before and after each use.** Read the dryer manual for maintenance guidelines, including cleaning the exhaust vent.

Laundry success

Best practices

Be mindful of where you put your clothes once you take them off. If you can wear it again, air it out, hang it up, or neatly fold it. Put dirty clothes in a

hamper but allow sweaty or damp clothes and socks to dry first. **Prep clothes as you put them in the hamper** (zip zippers and check pockets). Don’t let the dirty laundry pile get too big!

Best results

In summary, the main reasons for sorting laundry, understanding which products to use, and how to operate a washer and dryer are to **maintain the appearance and usefulness** of our clothing and other textile items. But remember to do what works for your situation.

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