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10 Tips for a Perfect Wash

- Read the labels**

The tags sewn into most articles of clothing advise about specific treatments.

- Test for colorfastness**

Labels often indicate whether a garment is colorfast. If you're unsure, dampen fabric in a discreet spot (like an inside seam), wait a minute or two, and blot with a white cloth; if the cloth takes on color, the garment is not colorfast. Wash non-colorfast clothes alone until they stop releasing dye (include an old white handkerchief or sock in the wash each time; once it emerges untainted, you can add the garment to the rest of your wash).

- Sort and separate**

Put whites and light colors in one basket, darks in another. Use additional baskets for extra-dirty garments or items that produce a lot of lint, such as terrycloth towels and flannel shirts. Divide heavy clothes (such as jeans) and lighter sheers and permanent-press items. Zip zippers, tie drawstrings, empty pockets, and unroll cuffs. If you see a loose hem or a split seam, fix it, or it will worsen in the wash.

- Pretreat stains**

Tackle any [stains](#) before loading the washer. Presoak heavily soiled clothes for a half hour in the washer, a large bucket, or a sink.

- Pour in detergent**

Powdered detergents are better on mud and clay and in hard water; liquids have the edge on greasy stains. Use the recommended amount: Too much detergent won't rinse out, too little won't clean well. Never use more than one additional product -- fabric softener, bleach -- at a time.

- Load the machine**

After adding detergent, add the clothes, distributing them evenly and loosely. Even a large load should be only about three-quarters full, so clothes can move.

Set the time

A short wash time of about six minutes is usually sufficient for all but the dirtiest clothes.

Choose a washer cycle

Regular -- for sturdy or heavy cottons and very dirty clothes; washer agitates and spins at high speed. Permanent press -- for most average loads; easier on clothes in general.

Delicates -- for lightweight, sheer, lacy, and loosely woven fabrics; washer agitates and spins slowly, approximating hand-washing.

Select water temperature

Use hot water (120 degrees) to keep whites white and to clean very dirty colorfast clothes -- in separate loads, of course. Warm water (90 to 110 degrees) is good for most average loads. Cold water (below 85 degrees) is best for bright colors that are likely to fade and delicates. Detergents are less effective in water less than 65 degrees. Shrinkage is caused by heat -- either from the dryer or hot water in the washer. To avoid it, wash items in warm or cold water, and hang to dry.

Choose dryer setting

Most dryers have a setting called Electronic or Automatic Dry, which lets you choose how dry you want the clothes to be rather than how long you want them to dry. The Permanent Press setting has a cool-down cycle at the end to reduce wrinkling. On Air Fluff, the dryer circulates air but adds no heat; this is good for freshening pillows and reviving clothes that have been packed in a suitcase but don't need to be washed. Or you can dry your clothes the old-fashioned way: on a clothesline or drying rack.