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Buying a Serger

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What is a serger? A serger is a sewing companion for the traditional sewing machine. Also known as an overlock, it can stitch, trim, and overcast in a single motion. A serger streamlines the construction process through convenience and speed. A serger can sew up to 1700 stitches per minute whereas the traditional sewing machine sews from 700 - 1100 stitches per minute.

Sergers can do wonderful things within the construction process, but they are a companion and cannot replace the traditional sewing machine. Sergers work well for making finished narrow seams, rolled hems, blindstitched hems, and overcast seams. Sergers alone can produce garments that only require those applications such as basic t-shirts, swimming suits, and table linens. But, sergers cannot do everything a sewing machine will do, such as install zippers in "inside" areas.

Types of Sergers and Stitches

Sergers may look similar and their stitches resemble each other until various serger types are identified. There are six types of sergers determined by the number of threads they use to create stitches. The types are: (1) 2-thread, (2) 3-thread, (3) 4/2-thread, (4) 4/3-thread, (5) 4-thread, and (6) 5-thread. Depending on the types of serger, the following stitches can be made:

- 2-Thread Overedge. This seam creates the least bulky finish and is good for seam finishes and flatlocking. It cannot be used for seaming because the two threads do not lock and therefore the seam will pull open.
- 3-Thread Overlock. This seam is one of the most common for finishing wovens and sewing knits. The threads lock at the seam line to create secure, stretchy seams.
- 3/4 Thread Overlock. This stitch can be made with 3 threads or with 4 threads for extra stability. The 4-thread stitch is a 3-thread overlock with a fourth thread down the middle, sometimes called a "mock-safety stitch". A variation has the fourth stitch next to 3-thread overlock. This machine will make a 3-thread stitch alone. The stitch is more secure for sewing wovens and loose knits.

- True 4-Thread Stitch. This stitch combines the 2-thread chain stitch and a separate 2-thread overedge to create a secure seam for sewing. It is suitable for woven fabrics. The 2-thread chain can be used alone to seam sweater knits.
- 5-Thread Overlock. This stitch combines the 2-thread chain stitch and the 3-thread overlock to create a secure seam for sewing. It can also sew the 2-thread chain stitch and the 3-thread overlock separately.

Which serger is right for me? As with most consumer products, the more features a serger has, the higher the price. Do not buy more than you think you will use, but do not buy one that will quickly fall short of your needs. Determine your needs and what you want the serger to do before shopping.

To help determine your needs, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my specific needs now and in the future? What will I be sewing?
- Will I only finish edges or will I also seam wovens?
- Will I do decorative serging with heavier thread?
- Will I do much flatlocking?

After asking yourself the previous questions, use the chart to determine which serger is for you.

TYPES OF SERGERS

<i>Types of Stitches</i>	<i>2-Thread</i>	<i>3-Thread</i>	<i>4/2 Thread</i>	<i>3/4 Thread</i>	<i>4-Thread</i>	<i>5-Thread</i>
2-Thread Overedge	yes	some models	yes	some models	yes	some models
2-Thread Chain Stitch			yes		yes	yes
3-Thread Overlock		yes		yes		yes
3/4 Thread Overlock				yes		some models
4/2 Thread Safety Stitch			yes		yes	some models
5-Thread Overlock						yes
Rolled Edge	yes	yes		yes		yes
Flatlock	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Compare Operating Ease

Once you have determined the type of serger most suitable for your needs, compare the operating ease of different brands. Consider the following:

- **Accessories/Attachments.** These are ways to expand your serger's capabilities. Accessories include elastic foot applicator; blind hemmer; presser feet for cording, piping, beading, and sequins; and a rolled hem plate.
- **Built-in-Light.** Check position for direct light to the needle and knife area. Determine ease of replacing bulb.
- **Foot Control.** Needs to be comfortable and easy to use. Newer models have electronic controls that allow the machine to slow down while maintaining full penetration power to sew heavy fabrics.
- **Knives.** Used for cutting seam allowance and threads before stitching. They should be able to be removed when you want to sew without cutting.
- **Needles.** Vary from one model to another. The two types are industrial, that are less likely to bend or break; and conventional, that are more readily accessible. Sergers with two needles that have separate screw clamps make needle changing easier.
- **Presser Feet.** If the presser foot snaps off or swings back, it provides ease in threading the serger.
- **Stitch Length.** Should be easy to change for different stitches and effects.
- **Stitch Width.** Should be easy to change for sewing with different weight fabric and thread.
- **Tension.** Will need to be adjusted according to stitch, fabric, and thread. Tension disks that provide numbers make tension setting easier.
- **Threading.** Sergers appear more complicated than traditional sewing machines to thread, but the color coded guides or symbols and diagrams provide ease. When comparing ease of threading, make special note of the lower looper. Ask the dealer to demonstrate and then try it yourself.

Shop Before You Buy

You have determined the type of serger best for your needs and the brand with the best operating ease. Now you must shop for your serger before you buy. Shopping before you buy includes "test driving" and shopping for a dealer. Use the Serger Buyer's Checklist to help you compare brands.

When "test driving" several different sergers, take scraps from recent projects and note the answers to the following questions:

- Is the tension consistent or are there narrow and wide spots?
- How much tension adjustment is needed for sewing different fabrics?
- How does the serger handle multiple layers of heavy fabric?
- What is the ease of switching between the standard overlock and the rolled hem or flatlocking?

- What accessories are available?

The last consideration when buying a serger is a dealer. Having a good, local dealer will make operating a serger easier. When shopping for a dealer, consider the following questions:

1. Is there a dealer in my city?
2. What are the dealer's knowledge, services, and reputation?
3. Does the dealer offer lessons?
4. Will the dealer help you with serging problems?
5. How fast is the dealer's repair service?
6. Will the dealer keep you up-to-date on new accessories and techniques?
7. Is the dealer an authorized dealer for your brand of serger?

Once you buy a serger, remove it from the box and begin to use it. Work through the owner's manual and take a dealer's class or enroll in other serger classes. Invest time in your serger so you can enjoy it and watch it pay for itself with every project you complete.

SERGER BUYER'S CHECKLIST

	Sergers 1	Sergers 2	Sergers 3
MANUFACTURER AND MODEL NUMBER	_____	_____	_____
TOTAL COST	_____	_____	_____
AVAILABLE SERVICE	_____	_____	_____
WARRANTY ON PARTS AND LABOR	_____	_____	_____
LESSONS INCLUDED IN TOTAL COST: yes or no	_____	_____	_____
<hr/>			
FEATURES OF SERGER:			
1. Number of threads used: 2, 3, 4, 5	_____	_____	_____
2. Type of stitches:	_____	_____	_____
a. overlock	_____	_____	_____
b. rolled edge	_____	_____	_____
c. blind hem	_____	_____	_____
d. chainstitch	_____	_____	_____
e. safety stitch	_____	_____	_____
3. Stitch quality on fabrics most commonly used	_____	_____	_____
4. Ease of changing stitch width and length	_____	_____	_____
5. Ease of changing to rolled edge	_____	_____	_____
6. Needle: conventional or industrial	_____	_____	_____
7. Knife blades: movable or stationary	_____	_____	_____
8. Location of needle guard or knife blade guard	_____	_____	_____
9. Location of presser foot lever	_____	_____	_____
10. Differential Feed: yes or no	_____	_____	_____
11. Threading: color-coded thread guide/threading charts	_____	_____	_____
12. Threading: ease of threading lower loopers	_____	_____	_____

- | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| 13. Thread: cone adapters and spool caps | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 14. Ease of adjusting tension: dials numbers, color-coded, or unmarked | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 15. Ease of cleaning and oiling | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 16. Power switch: yes or no | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 17. Location of power switch and light switch | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 18. Location of light | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 19. Stability of machine when stitching | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 20. Size of serger bed: adequate work space | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 21. Instruction manual: easy to understand | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 22. Attachments: availability and/or additional costs | _____ | _____ | _____ |

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| a. carrying handle | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| b. free arm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| c. special table | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| d. dust cover | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| e. travel case | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| f. accessory case contents | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| g. waste container | _____ | _____ | _____ |
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