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Wool and Wool Blends

This NebGuide contains information about buying and sewing wool and wool blends.

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Wool Fiber Properties

Wool is a unique fiber. It is a natural fiber made from the fleece of sheep. Wool fabrics are not all alike. They come in a variety of textures and weights. Wool can be sheer, thin, soft, thick, stiff or anything in between. Wool fabrics are constructed by weaving, knitting or felting.

Wool is popular to work with because it has remarkable qualities -- durability, absorbency, resistance to flame and static, drapability, and its appealing hand. "Hand" is the way the fabric feels as you touch it. Wool fabrics have a springy, yet soft feel. Seams can be eased into place without puckering, stretching, or slipping. Wool fabrics press beautifully and can be molded and shaped into garments that keep their shape if given proper care. Other qualities that make wool fabric a good choice for garments include wrinkle recovery, color fastness, stain resistance and its resiliency, which enables the wool to bounce back to its original shape after wearing.

Most of all, wool is comfortable. Not only does it have excellent insulating ability to keep you warm, but this insulating property also keeps the heat out in warm environments. Wool has the ability to absorb moisture -- as much as 30% of its own weight -- without feeling damp. Wool sheds dirt easily, so it doesn't need to be cleaned as often as other fabrics.

Wool Fabric Types

Before you buy any wool fabric or garment, look for the label. The label tells you the precise fiber

percentages of the fabric and gives care instructions. Fiber content is an important guide to fabric performance. Generally, the more wool in the fabric the better. These are some of the labels that pertain to wool:

100% Wool or Pure Wool -- This product is composed entirely of new wool being used for the first time and may contain up to 5% of a fiber other than wool as surface ornamentation.

Virgin Wool -- New wool that has never been used.

Recycled Wool -- This is a term replacing reused or reprocessed wool. Wool scraps left from the cutting of 100% wool garments are shredded back into fibers. This wool is frequently used for gloves, caps, inter-lining and industrial uses.

Woolmark -- This symbol signifies a quality-tested product of pure wool (*Figure 1*).

Woolblend mark -- This symbol identifies a quality-tested product which combines at least 60 percent wool with a synthetic or other natural fiber (*Figure 1*).

Superwash -- This symbol indicates that the wool product can be successfully machine washed using a mild detergent and machine-dried (*Figure 1*).

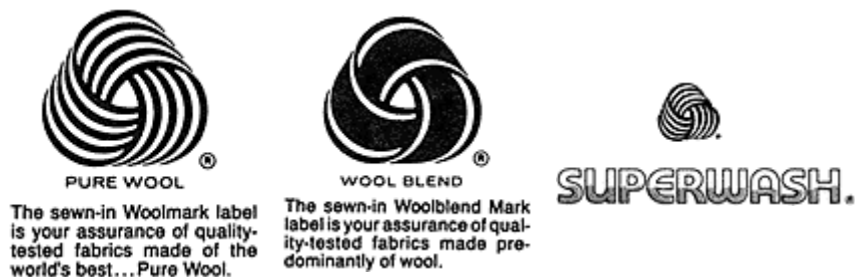


Figure 1. The Woolmark, Woolblend Mark and Superwash registered logos shown here are reproduced with permission from the Wool Bureau, Inc., United States Branch, International Wool Secretariat.

A wool blend is the result of fibers being mixed before they are spun into a yarn. Wool blends may result in a higher performance fabric, an improved appearance and greater economy.

Blends with a high percentage of wool generally behave quite similarly to wool. Blends with higher percentages of synthetic fibers are usually more heat-sensitive and don't press or ease as well as 100% wool. Some wools and wool blends are washable, but some must be dry cleaned. Be sure to read the care instructions carefully.

Two other terms you should be familiar with are "woolen" and "worsted." *Woolen* fabrics are woven from yarns made of shorter, fuzzy fibers. These fibers have a dull, soft, somewhat fuzzy texture. Examples are wool flannel and tweed. These are good choices for beginning sewers because irregularities in stitching are less obvious.

Worsted fabrics are woven from yarns made of long fibers that are parallel to one another. The fabric is smooth, hard textured and somewhat lustrous. Examples include gabardine, serge and crepe. These fabrics are not recommended for beginners.

Choose a simple pattern if you are sewing with wool for the first time. A medium-weight fabric is easier to work with than either a very light weight or very bulky wool fabric. As your confidence grows, you can select patterns with more detail.

Wool Preparation

Wool's disadvantage is shrinkage. Preshrink the fabric to allow for relaxation shrinkage. This occurs when there is tension on the yarns during the weaving process. Some wools and wool blends are already preshrunk when you buy them, so be sure to check the labels. Some labels may use the words sponged or needle-ready. If it is not labeled, test the fabric for possible shrinkage as follows.

Place the folded fabric with right sides together on the ironing board. Work with the corner where the cut edge and selvages meet. Cover the material with a dry cloth. Using a steam iron on the "wool" setting, set the iron on top of the dry cloth and count "one iron, two iron," etc. until "eight iron" (approximately 8 seconds). Set the iron aside. Remove the press cloth and check the fabric. If you see ripples around the imprint of the iron it means the fabric will shrink to some extent if it is improperly handled.

This shrinkage can be handled by a reliable dry cleaner at a reasonable cost or you can shrink the fabric yourself by doing the following:

- Straighten the cross-wise or cut ends of the wool by pulling a yarn or basting along a cross-wise thread. Cut edges straight with the grain.
- Fold the fabric in half lengthwise, wrong side out. Hand or machine baste raw edges and selvages together.
- Wet a sheet completely in warm water. Remove the excess water by running the sheet through the spin cycle of an automatic washer.
- Spread the damp sheet on papers or a sheet of plastic on the floor.
- Lay the fabric on half of the wet sheet. Fold the other half of the sheet back over the fabric. Beginning at one end, fold over about one foot of the fabric and sheet. Continue making one foot folds until it is completely folded.
- Cover the sheet with paper, towels or plastic and let it rest for several hours or overnight.
- Carefully remove the fabric from the sheet and place it on a flat surface. Smooth the fabric to remove wrinkles and check to see that it is on the straight of grain.
- If pressing is necessary, press from the wrong side while the fabric is slightly damp, using a dry press cloth. If the fabric is slightly off grain, straighten it with careful steam pressing. A blocking board will help. It is also advisable to preshrink any linings, zipper tapes, and interfacing. See *G91-1028, Preparing Fabric for Use* for more information.

Cutting and Marking

Sometimes it is difficult to tell the right side of the wool fabric from the wrong side. Usually the fabric is folded with the wrong side out when purchased. If you can't tell the difference, be sure to use the same side as the right side for every garment piece. It is a good idea to mark each piece on the wrong side with thread or chalk. If you are working with a knit, plaid or stripe, read *Sewing With Plaids* (HEG76-36), *Sewing With Stripes* (HEG88-237)* and *Sewing With Knit Fabric* (G92-1091) for information on additional techniques.

It is best to use tailor's tacks when marking wool. The thread should be a different color than the fabric, but not too different in case the color crocks off on the fabric. Tailor's chalk or a hard-milled hand soap (not a cream base) can also be used.

Interfacings

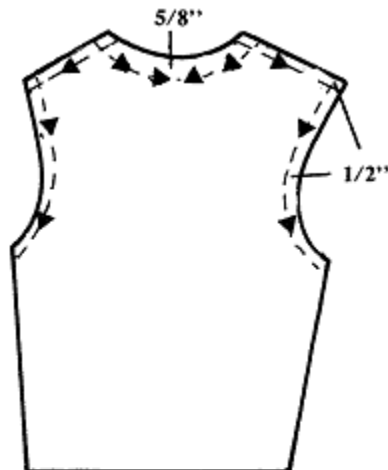
Select interfacings that are compatible with the weight of the fabric, the crispness needed and the care you will give the garment. Check the label for care instructions.

Hair canvas is the traditional interfacing used for tailored wool garments, but other woven, nonwoven or knit interfacings in either sew-in or fusible styles can also be used. If a sew-in is selected, drape the wool over the different weight interfacings to see which one gives the effect you want. If a fusible is selected, test it to make sure it gives the right amount of crispness and doesn't change the surface of the wool. If you see a ridge where the interfacing ends, either pink the edge to prevent it from showing through, interface the facing, or do the entire piece.

Most fusible interfacings will last through laundering and dry cleaning if they are applied properly. Pre-shrink the interfacing by placing it in hot water for 10 minutes. Blot excess moisture and air dry.

Follow the fusing instructions given by the manufacturer. If instructions state to use a dry iron and dry press cloth or a steam iron on wool setting and a damp press cloth, do so. It may take anywhere from 10 to 15 seconds to fuse the interfacing in place.

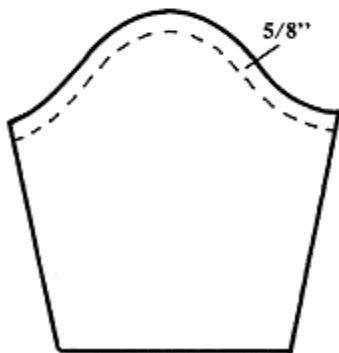
Sewing Techniques



Stay stitch all curved and bias edges of the garment pieces so these edges won't stretch. Use a regular stitch length of 10 to 12 stitches per inch, and stitch 1/2 inch from the raw edges except at the neckline and sleeve cap. Stay stitch those areas on the seam line. Always stitch with the grain.

Figure 2. Stay stitch curved and biased edges to prevent stretching.

Needle size and stitch length will depend on the weight of the fabric. Thicker wools require a larger needle and longer stitch length (10 stitches per inch). These fabrics may need less pressure so the top layer of fabric doesn't creep ahead as you sew. Finer fabrics require a smaller needle and shorter stitch length (12 stitches per inch). If your wool fabric is a knit, remember to use a ballpoint needle. Use a good quality thread, such as high-quality polyester thread or a cotton-polyester core thread.



Wool garments are most often lined to help them retain their shape, to make them more comfortable to wear, and to help make them hang better.

Seams are pressed open to create less bulk and to have smoother seams.

Seam finishes are only necessary on wool fabrics that ravel. Most lined garments do not need a seam finish, since the seams are not exposed. For bulky fabrics and fabrics that ravel, try binding the seams (*Figure 3*). See *HEG 81-147, Seam Finishes*, for more information.

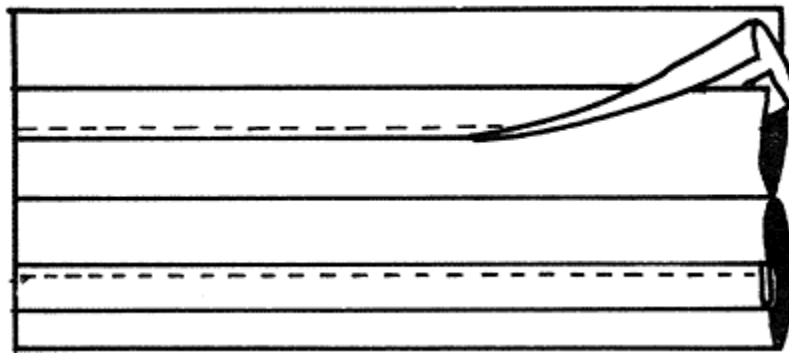


Figure 3. Binding the seams keeps them from raveling.

If the fabric is bulky and darts may leave imprints on the front, slash the darts open, and finish the raw edges with a hand or machine overcast. Seam imprints can be avoided by placing strips of brown paper under the seam allowances while pressing.

Grading seams also reduces bulk. Leave the seam allowance closest to the outside of the garment the full 5/8 inch width. Trim each additional seam allowance a little narrower, with the innermost seam allowance trimmed to about 3/8 inch.

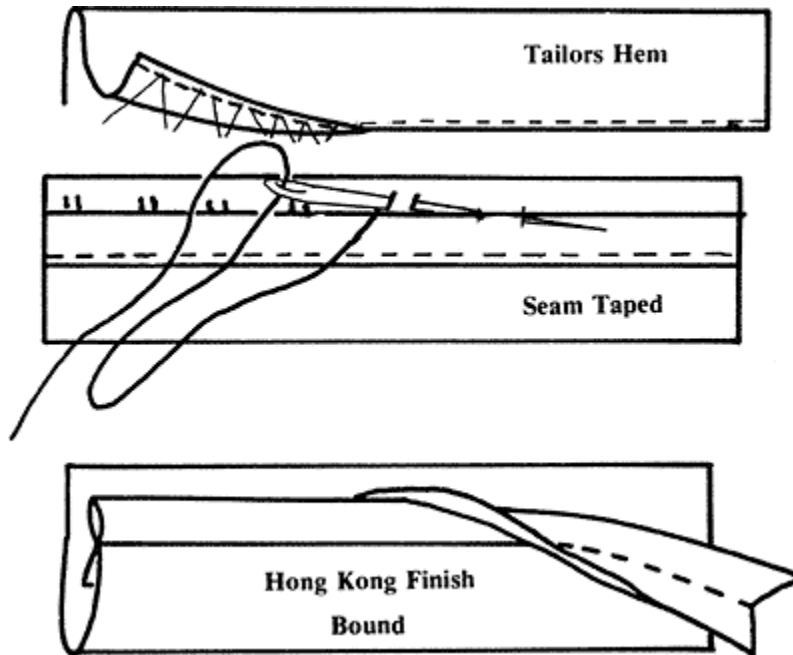


Figure 4. Three techniques for hemming bulky wools or those that ravel.

The technique you use on hems will depend on how bulky the fabric is and how much it ravel. For these hems, try using seam tape or bind the edges (*Figure 4*). For hems that won't ravel and aren't bulky, edge-stitch the cut edge by using a machine overcast or zig-zag stitch and hand stitch the hem. Remember to allow the garment to hang for about 24 hours before establishing a hemline.

Pressing

Because wool is an animal fiber it scorches and gets dry and brittle with the use of dry heat. Always use

moist heat in pressing. Either use a steam iron with a wool press cloth or a dry iron with a damp cloth. Lay the wool press cloth next to the garment before pressing with the damp cloth. Never press wool fabrics completely dry. Allow the fabric to air dry before further handling. This prevents stretching and wrinkling. A wool press cloth prevents overpressing and a shine on the fabric. Always press with a lowering and lifting motion. Let the steam do the pressing for you.

Remember to place strips of brown paper under the seam allowances to prevent imprints on the front side of fabric. Use a tailor's ham for rounded areas such as darts, curved seams, rolled collars, lapels, and eased areas. And remember, as with all fabrics, press up and down and with the grain of fabric. For more information, see *HEG 77-76, Pressing Methods*.

*All of the publications referred to in this NebGuide are available from the Cooperative Extension Service office in your county.

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