

# Consumer Choices

## Using textile labels

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**Reading textile labels can help you make wise decisions about what to purchase, and help you care for items you already own.**

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Labeling helps consumers understand choices and make decisions about textiles and apparel. This publication helps explain some of the labels that accompany clothing and household textiles.

### Fiber content labels

Fiber content labels are required by the Textile Fiber Products Identification Act, 1960, and its amendments. This federal law requires that manufacturers:

- identify the fibers in the product by generic name (a name given to a family of fibers with similar chemical composition);
- show the percentage of each type of fiber in the product in descending order by weight of fiber present;
- give the manufacturer's name or registered number;
- explain where the item was manufactured, for example, "made in U.S.A."

Natural fibers are labeled by their common name: cotton, linen, ramie, silk, wool. Figure 3 shows labels from Cotton Incorporated. Manufactured fibers used in apparel and furnishing textiles are labeled by generic class: acetate, acrylic, lyocell, modacrylic, nylon, olefin, polyester, rayon, rubber, saran, spandex, and vinyon. Metallic or glass content also may be noted. Additional generic classes identify fibers used primarily for industrial or specialty purposes: aramid, novoloid, PBI, sulfar. The various fibers differ in appearance, texture, and durability. Fiber content affects care required. At least 15 percent of most fibers is needed to make a difference in the texture or performance of a blend. However, as little as 3 percent spandex will add elasticity.

### Flammability labels

Flammability standards set by the Consumer Product Safety Commission regulate labels concerning textile flammability. Most textiles will burn, so unless it is labeled otherwise, assume a textile is flammable.

### Fur product labels

The Fur Products Labeling Act, 1951, requires that fur products be labeled honestly. These labels state:

- the species of animal;
- the country of origin;
- inclusion of paws, tails, or reused fur;
- dyeing, coloring, or bleaching of fur; and
- the name or registration number of the manufacturer.

### Permanent care labels

Permanent care labels are required by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) under the Care Labeling Rule, 1972, and its amendments. The Care Labeling Rule covers textile wearing apparel and certain piece goods. It does not cover home furnishings (e.g., sheets and towels), fur, or leather apparel. Care labels explain to both consumers and dry cleaners what kind of care the manufacturer of an item recommends. Manufacturers and importers of home sewing fabrics also must give the care instructions on the end of the bolt or roll of fabric.

Care labels may specify hand washing, machine washing, or dry cleaning. If ironing is needed for appearance, instructions must be given, but if hot ironing is safe, temperatures need not be listed. If bleaches are safe to use on a regular basis, their mention is not required. If no bleach is safe, the label must say "no bleach." If some solvents are not safe for dry cleaning, a recommended one must be listed.

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**Figure 1. ASTM Symbol System—Basic Symbols**



**Figure 2. ASTM Symbol System—Additional Symbols**

WASH	
● water temperature up to 85°F= cold washing; low	machine wash permanent press
●● water temperature up to 105°F= cool washing; medium	machine wash gentle
●●● water temperature up to 120°F= warm washing; high	hand wash
do not wring	
BLEACH	
non-chlorine, all fabric bleach only	do not bleach
DRY	
permanent press	dry flat
delicate/gentle	line dry
drip dry	dry in shade
IRON	
low iron	high iron
medium iron	no steam
DRYCLEAN	
dry clean	do not dry clean

The Care Labeling Rule requires labeling apparel with one care instruction that works. These labels must:

- appear on garments in visible or easily found locations;
- stay permanently attached for the life of the garment;
- warn against any part of a recommended care procedure that would be harmful; and
- be based on reasonable evidence that the care procedure is safe for the item.

The FTC has adopted a symbol system that may be used to show care requirements. The symbols can be used instead of written instructions in English (required until January 1999) and are more practical in the world market. The new symbols were developed by the American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM).

The use of the ASTM symbols began in July 1997. A written guide to the symbols also went into use at that time. The FTC also set an end date (January 1999) for required use of both the written care instructions and the written guide to symbols. After January 1, 1999, symbols can be used without words. A lack of written information makes it necessary that consumers, dry cleaners, and manufacturers understand the symbols by the January 1999 date.

For laundering instructions, the ASTM system requires four symbols in the following order—washing, bleaching, drying, and ironing. Dry-cleaning requires only one symbol, but if modifications of any normal dry-cleaning process are required, they must be stated in words (for example, short cycle). Symbols consumers most likely will need to know are shown in figures 1 and 2.

The ASTM symbol system assumes that consumers will understand common care procedures. For example, “permanent press” means that a cool-down cycle or rinse in the washer will be used before spinning to prevent wrinkling. “Drip dry” means to hang without wringing or spinning that could cause wrinkling. “Drying flat” means to lay out the item horizontally for drying.

The Care Labeling Rule covers textile wearing apparel and certain piece goods. Certain items are exempt from the requirement of a sewn-in label (e.g., reversible garments) but the information must be provided on a hang tag. Goods for which the harshest procedures are safe are also exempt from the requirement of a permanent care label, but a statement such as “wash

or dry-clean, any method" should appear on a hangtag or in some other conspicuous place. Items also may be labeled "do not wash, do not dry-clean." Care information is not required to be provided to institutional buyers.

The new ASTM symbol system is not exactly the same as the international care label system that is used by the International Standards Organization (ISO) in European countries. However, many of the symbols of ASTM and ISO are similar, which removes much of the language barrier to international trade.

### Shrinkage labels

Fabrics may shrink or stretch out of shape during use and care, but generally blends that contain synthetic fibers will shrink less than will 100 percent cotton or wool. However, blends with synthetic fibers are heat sensitive and may shrink in the dryer if overheated. Trademarked finishes to reduce fabric shrinkage sometimes are noted on labels. General terms describing shrinkage are:

- 3 percent shrinkage—equivalent to reducing the garment by about one size, altering fit.
- prewashed—less likely to shrink when washed; with denim, this usually means a soft, faded look.
- preshrunk—a meaningless term that is not helpful. It fails to tell how much more the product will shrink when washed again.

### Wool labels

The Wool Products Labeling Act, 1939, and its amendments govern wool labeling. Recycled wool includes fibers recovered from previously manufactured new or used cloth. "Wool" refers to any new wool never before used in cloth. "Virgin" is a popular marketing term that means the same as "wool." "Lambswool" means the wool is from younger animals; it tends to be soft and pleasing to touch. Angora, alpaca, camel, cashmere, llama, mink, and rabbit wools must be present in amounts of 25 percent or more to alter the appearance and performance of wool blend fabrics. The Woolmark and Woolblend Mark are promotional symbols of the Wool Bureau, Inc. (See figure 4.)

### Union labels

These labels indicate that the garment was sewn in the United States by members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, International Ladies Garment Workers Union of America, or the United Garment Workers of America. Union members are interested in having consumers understand their contributions to the garments.

### U.S.A. labels

All textile products manufactured in this country must be labeled "Made in the U.S.A." This requirement was added to the Textile Fiber Products Identification Act, the Tariff Act of 1930, and the Wool Products Act because the U.S. textile industry wanted to increase consumer awareness of U.S. manufacturing. These labels may not mean that all steps in the fabric processing and garment manufacturing were done in this country.

Figure 3. Seal of Cotton



The Seal of Cotton identifies 100 percent cotton products made in the United States of U.S. grown upland cotton. This seal is a registered trademark of Cotton Incorporated, the research and marketing company representing American cotton products. The NATURAL BLEND trademark indicates durable press products containing at least 60 percent or more of U.S. upland cotton.

Figure 4. Woolmark and Woolblend symbols



The Woolmark can be used only on products made of 100 percent wool. The Woolblend Mark can be used on products that contain a minimum of 60 percent pure wool. The balance may be either natural or synthetic fibers. These labels are provided voluntarily by manufacturers and are a promotional device sponsored by The Wool Bureau, Inc., a trade association.



Figure 5. Crafted with Pride in U.S.A.

## Crafted with Pride labels

Crafted with Pride is a private council that encourages labeling to identify U.S. made products, especially in industries such as apparel and steel, which are affected by competition from international sources.

## Other common label terms

Some voluntary label terms are listed here.

- *Carded*—shorter, thicker cotton fibers provide a soft, durable fabric, e.g., muslin.
- *Combed*—longer, straight cotton fibers lie parallel and provide a smooth, lustrous, and strong fabric, e.g., percale.
- *Madras*—a soft, cotton plaid fabric, often from India, yarn-dyed with natural vegetable dyes that tend to fade or “bleed” in laundry, giving blended colors. Commonly imitated by other processes.
- *Permanent or durable press, wrinkle free, or wrinkle resistant*—a chemical treatment for cotton fabrics that increases wrinkle resistance.
- *Pima*—a cotton plant variety that gives high quality long, lustrous, and smooth fibers.
- *Pure*—indicates only one fiber type is used in the fabric. “Pure cotton” is 100 percent cotton and not a blend.
- *Ramie*—a cellulosic fiber grown in Asia that has characteristics similar to linen.
- *Raw silk*—a rather stiff, crisp textured fabric that has not been degummed (boiled) to remove the natural gum from the silkworm.
- *Textured yarn*—a synthetic fiber yarn that has increased bulk, warmth, and elasticity because it has been heat set with crimp.

- *Thread count or count*—the sum of the yarns from each direction in a woven fabric. A higher thread count gives a stronger, smoother fabric.
- *Upland cotton*—the cotton plant variety most common in the United States and valued for its fiber length, diameter, and uniformity.
- *Vat dyed*—the fabric has been dyed using a class of dyes known for their superior colorfastness and resistance to fading.
- *Woolen*—fabric is thick and fuzzy because wool fibers in yarns are short and partially straightened.
- *Worsted*—fabric is smooth, lustrous, and strong because fibers in wool yarns are long and combed to straighten.

## Read before you buy

Read the labels *before* you buy textiles and apparel. Use the labels to make informed choices. Follow care labels as you wear and care for items. Provide appropriate instructions to dry cleaners about stains and point out any cautionary statements on the labels so that they can serve you better. You pay the costs of labeling; you may as well receive the benefits of labeling.

## For more information

*Care Labeling of Textile Wearing Apparel and Certain Piece Goods*. Federal Trade Commission, Trade Regulation Rule. 6th St. and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. Washington. D.C. 20580.

Kadolph, S., et al. (1997) *Textiles*. Eighth Edition. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Paxar Corporation, *A Guide to Using Care Label Symbols*, Care Label Booklet. Produced in cooperation with the Federal Trade Commission.

Stone, J. (1997) *Quick 'n Easy Stain Removal*, Pm-858, Revised, Iowa State University Extension, Ames, Iowa.

ASTM symbols provided by Federal Trade Commission Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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