

Cotton and the Consumer

Cotton is a miracle of nature...

It's a fiber, feed and food crop.



The fiber of a thousand faces and almost as many uses, cotton is noted for its versatility, appearance, performance and—above all—its natural comfort. From all types of apparel... to sheets and towels... tarpaulins and tents... cotton in today's fast-moving world is still nature's wonder fiber, providing thousands of useful products and supporting millions of jobs as it moves year after year from field to fabric.

Here are some of the most frequently asked questions about this miracle fiber. If your question isn't answered here, check out www.cottoncounts.net

How long has cotton been in use?

Cotton has been cultivated and used to make fabrics for at least 7,000 years. It may have existed in Egypt as early as 12000 B.C. Fragments of cotton fabrics have been found by archeologists in Mexico (from 3500 B.C.), in India (3000 B.C.), in Peru (2500 B.C.) and in the southwestern U.S. (500 B.C.).



What's the difference between cotton and linen?

Natural fibers fall into two main groups: protein fibers, which come from animals, and vegetable fibers, which come from plants. The main ingredient in all vegetable fibers is cellulose, a carbohydrate found in all plant life. Both cotton and linen are vegetable fibers. Linen is made from the flax plant, cotton is made from the cotton plant.

What is the origin of denim?

Two of the fabrics most symbolic of American fashion - chambray and denim - are French imports. A soft comfortable fabric with contrasting colored and white yarns, chambray was first found in Chambray, France. Denim, originating in Nimes, France, was introduced to this country via work pants designed for the mining industry by Mr. Levi Strauss.



Are khakis and chinos the same thing?

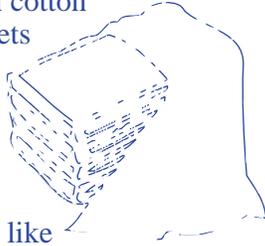
Both chino and khaki were fabrics once used in military uniforms. Today these words are used interchangeably to refer to the tan-colored pants inspired by military looks. Khaki is derived from a Hindu word that means "dust color." Originally, khaki referred to a dull yellow-brown cotton or wool uniform fabric used for its camouflage effect by the armed forces of England, France and the U.S. since the mid-19th century.

In World War I, a green tint was added. Khaki work pants and jackets were adapted for sports by men and women in the 1950s and 60s. Chino has its roots in World War I when the U.S. army purchased this durable cotton twill from China for use by soldiers in the Philippines. In the late 1950s, it was adapted by men and boys for school and general wear, particularly for pants.



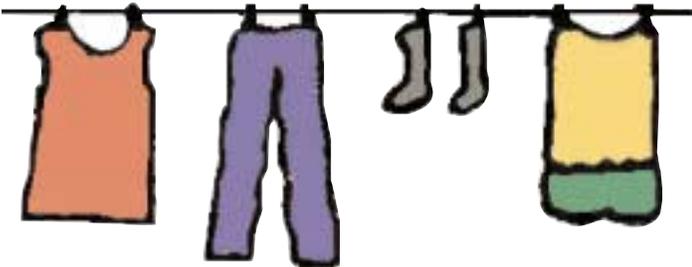
What makes terry cloth towels so absorbent?

Most terry cloth is made with cotton because the absorbent fiber gets stronger when wet and it can be sanitized without harm in very hot water using strong bleach and detergent. Terry cloth is usually made with looped pile because loops act like very small sponges. Looped pile is also better able to withstand the strain of rubbing, pulling twisting and tugging by the user. Loosely twisted loops are softer and more absorbent than tightly twisted loops, which produce a rougher fabric. Long pile is more absorbent than short pile. Terry cloth is most absorbent when it has loops on both sides. Cotton can absorb up to 27 times its own weight in water.



Why do cotton and wool shrink when you wash them?

There are two kinds of shrinkage. Progressive shrinkage occurs when the fiber itself shrinks. Wool fiber shrinks a little more each time it is washed, which is why wool is usually dry cleaned. Relaxation shrinkage is when the fabric shrinks. It is caused by the tension applied to yarns and fabrics during construction. The tension is released when the fabric is washed or steam pressed, causing it to shrink to its natural size. Most cotton fabric shrinkage occurs during the first wash.



What makes cotton wrinkle?

During wearing and cleaning, fabrics are temporarily distorted to accommodate the stress of use. If the fabric does not recover its original shape, the results are described as wrinkling. Untreated cotton fibers do not have a permanent memory. The cellulose chains in the fiber move by breaking and re-establishing hydrogen bonds. There are no natural forces to promote the cellulose chains to return to their original configuration.

What is wrinkle-resistant cotton?

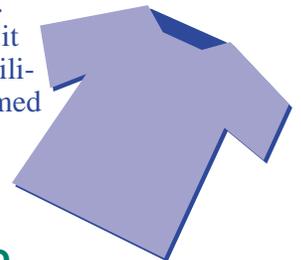
This innovative fabric treatment works by strengthening the molecular “bridges” that connect cellulose molecules in a cotton fiber. The special process stabilizes the hydrogen bridges. This permits the fabric to retain its smooth surface, even after numerous washings. The finish does not alter cotton’s durability, color clarity or natural absorbency.

How can you pack cotton clothes to minimize wrinkling?

Cotton knit sweaters and t-shirts can be rolled and placed in a suitcase to prevent wrinkling. Garments made from woven cotton fabrics such as button-down shirts and trousers should first be folded along their natural creases. Then, drape each garment across the suitcase so that the ends hang over the sides. Alternate putting the top of each garment on the right and left side so that the thickness remains uniform. Next, fold each item around the other, alternating the overhang from right and left sides. By following the “inter-folding” method of packing, clothes cushion each other and are less likely to get wrinkled.

How did the T-shirt get its name?

One of the earliest prototypes for the T-shirt dates to 1880, when sailors in the U.S. Navy were issued an elbow and hip length undershirt. When laid out on a flat surface, it resembled a perfect “T.” This military undergarment was transformed over the next few decades and became a staple in civilian men’s wardrobes by the 1950s.

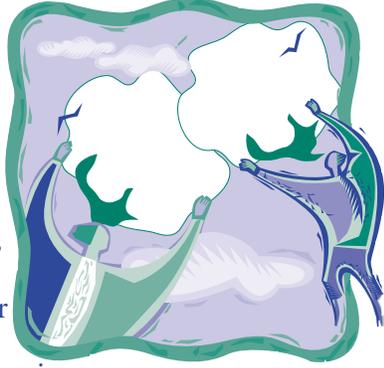


Why do sheets vary so much in price?

A single bed sheet can cost as little as \$10 or as much as \$100. Fiber content, thread count and brand name help determine the price. Thread count refers to the number of threads in one square inch of fabric. The higher the count, the softer and stronger the fabric, and the finer the quality of the sheet. (Counts usually range from 128 to 310.) Muslin, a simple weave, is a cotton sheeting fabric with a thread count of less than 180. Percale is a closely woven cotton fabric, usually made with combed yarns with a thread count of 180 or higher. Fabric finishes and embellishments can affect cost. Mercerized cotton has been treated with alkalis for a distinctive sheen; sanforized cotton has been pre-shrunk; easy-care and wrinkle-resistant finishes are chemical treatments intended to keep sheets looking smoother. Distinctive details such as hem stitching, piping or eyelet trim are also factors contributing to cost.

What are personal care products made from?

Many people purchase personal care products such as swabs, cosmetic puffs, rounds or wipes and automatically assume they are made of cotton. They're sometimes surprised to find that what they bought is actually made of rayon, polyester or polypropylene. Although beauty aids made from other fibers may look like cotton, they often don't perform as well. Unlike synthetics, cotton has superior absorbency and a naturally textured surface that makes it an effective cleanser. Because the fiber can withstand high temperatures, it can be sterilized. In addition, cotton personal care products are "finish free." Synthetics are often chemically treated to make the fiber suitable for processing. Individuals with hypersensitive skin or are prone to allergic reactions, may prefer to stick with beauty aids made from natural fibers.



How do I care for cotton clothing?

- Sort clothing by color, keeping whites, darks, brights and medium colors together.
- Wash heavily soiled items separately from slightly soiled items to prevent fading.
- Garments which generate lint, such as fleece, flannels and chenille, should be washed separately.
- Chlorine bleach can be used safely on cotton whites and color-safe bleach on dyed cottons.
- All garments that are not colorfast should be washed separately.
- Cold rinse water saves energy and makes ironing easier.
- Use a higher heat setting for the dryer since cotton takes longer to dry than less absorbent fibers.
- All cotton clothing should be left in the dryer just long enough to remove wrinkles and moisture. If left too long, the heat can "set" wrinkles, increase static cling and cause shrinkage.
- Use highest setting on an iron for cotton clothing.



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