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Washing symbols explained

Baffled by confusing washing symbols on your clothes labels? Select from commonly used symbols below to find out what each means.

Bleaching symbols



- A triangle means you can safely use a cold, dilute solution of bleach
- If the triangle has two stripes, only a non-chlorine, colour-safe bleach should be used
- If the triangle has a cross over it, the item can't be bleached

Dry cleaning symbols



Some clothes can – or must – be dry cleaned.

- A circle means the garment is suitable for dry cleaning
- If there's a letter inside the circle, it's to tell the dry cleaner which chemical wash and method to use. If the circle has a cross over it, the item shouldn't be dry cleaned
- A line on the bottom left of the circle means short cycle. A line to the bottom right is for low heat.

Clothes manufacturers tend to give good cleaning advice. So, even if you suspect they're being over cautious, it's best to follow what they say.

Drying symbols



Drying your clothes can be where it all goes wrong and you either end up stretching your favourite wool jumper or shrinking your best top. In contrast to tumble drying, natural drying symbols can be harder to interpret. Here's what the natural drying symbols actually mean:

- If the square has one drooping line, this means you can hang your clothes to dry on a washing line outside
- If the square has three vertical lines in it, this means drip dry your clothes on a rack indoors
- If the square has one horizontal line, this means dry the garment flat to keep its shape

Handwash symbols



If the tub contains a handwash program, wash the item by hand at 40°C or lower.

Many washing machines have a handwash program. This is for delicate garments such as cashmere or silk, and cleans more gently than the normal setting to prevent clothes snagging or shrinking.

For more information on this, read our guide to using different washing machine programs at cooler temperatures to learn more about your options.

Ironing symbols



The dots on ironing symbols correspond to the dots on an iron's temperature settings: the more dots there are, the more heat can be applied.

- If the iron symbol doesn't have any dots, the garment can be ironed at any temperature
- Three dots are for linen and cotton
- Two dots are for synthetics
- One dot is for the most delicate items such as woollens and silk
- If the iron symbol has a cross through it, that garment is not suitable to be ironed. If the symbol has two or three lines protruding from the bottom of the iron with a cross over it, this means you must dry iron and not steam iron

Synthetics and cottons symbols



The bars underneath the tub icon refer to rinsing and spinning. Such items shouldn't be wrung by hand.

- If there are no bars, the garment can be spun and rinsed as normal
- One bar indicates that the spin speed should be reduced
- Two bars means the clothes need a mild wash action, but can be spun and rinsed normally
- If there's a cross through the tub, that item should not be washed and will probably need to be dry cleaned

Washing temperatures symbols



If your clothes are machine washable then you'll see this tub icon on the label. The number within the tub icon shows the maximum temperature that item of clothing can be washed at. This can range from 30°C to 95°C.

Many claim that washing at 30°C instead of 40°C is the key to saving money and energy. For this reason you might opt for a lower temperature to the label guide.

But while it may conserve energy and save on running costs, 30°C doesn't always remove tougher stains such as oil and grease.

Tumble drying symbols



Getting tumble drying right is easy if you use the correct temperature.

- A circle inside a square means you can tumble dry the garment
- The dots indicate temperature – one for low heat, two for slightly higher heat, and three for high heat
- A cross over the symbol means you shouldn't tumble dry the garment

Some clothes may appear similar but have different labels – they're most likely made from different fibres or blends. Some fibres or blends can change size or become 'furred' by tumble drying. An item that's suitable for tumble drying will have been treated to protect against these effects.

Wringing symbols



Wringing out your clothes is possibly the most common mistake made during hand washing or drying clothes without a dryer. Twisting the fabric by hand can seriously damage your favourite item of clothing.

If you're not sure whether to wring out the excess water by hand, look out for the symbols above on your clothing label:

- Symbol on the left - go ahead and wring your clothes with confidence
- Symbol on the right with a cross through it - do not attempt to wring your clothes