

EDUCATION: WHY ALL THE LINT? COTTON THREAD QUALITY

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Lint is the accumulation of cotton fibers. It can come from thread, fabric, and batting. The easiest way to determine the source of the lint is to compare the color of the lint to the color of the thread, fabric, and batting.

If you get a lot of thread-related lint when sewing, there are three main causes.

1. Low or medium quality thread. The majority of threads on the market are low or medium quality. Most companies think it just costs too much to make a high quality thread so they target the low-price market, which, unfortunately, is much larger than the high quality market. A label may state 'long staple cotton' but if steps are not implemented during processing to produce a quality thread, the result will be poor. A high quality cotton thread should not produce much lint.

Solutions to the next two causes will only work if the thread is high quality. (We can't fix bad.)



2. If the lint buildup is at the needle, the needle may be too small or not the best needle style. A [Topstitch needle](#) has a double-size eye that provides a larger area for thread to pass through, resulting in much less stress on the thread. Professionals and educators most often recommend Topstitch needles for piecing, quilting, embroidering, crafting, clothing construction, and nearly every sewing application. The only exception is when sewing on a knit fabric, a ballpoint needle is preferred. Other than that, the Topstitch needle for everything. Choose the needle size based on the thread size.

3. If the lint buildup is in the tension area or in the bobbin area, the tension is too tight and is stressing or rubbing the thread. This is an easy fix by loosening the top and/or bobbin tensions. [Learning to adjust tension](#) is the most liberating thing in the sewing world. It takes control away from the machine and returns it to you.

Don't believe the labels The best way to distinguish thread quality is not by the label, but by using the product. There is more to a product than the fiber type. Processing techniques add as much or more to the finished product quality as does the raw material. Following is a list of processing terms which affect the quality of cotton thread.

Mercerized Today, nearly all cotton thread is mercerized. If a label only says *mercerized cotton*, it is probably because there is nothing else to brag about (such as long staple or extra-long staple). Mercerizing is a process of treating cotton thread with a solution, causing the fibers to swell. This process allows the dye to better penetrate the fibers, thereby increasing the luster. Labels can include a limited amount of information and stating that the cotton is mercerized is not important because most cotton thread is automatically mercerized.

Staple The length of the raw material fiber. The longer the staple, the stronger the thread. If there is no mention of the staple length, assume it is a regular (or short) staple thread. If it is long staple or extra long staple, it will state that fact.

Gassed Gassing refers to passing a cotton thread at high speed through a flame, burning off the excess fuzz in order to create a higher sheen. Most labels will not include this information.

Glazed Glazing involves heating the thread and then coating it with waxes, starches, and other chemicals. Glazing results in a glossy thread with a hard finish. Glazed thread is stiffer than unglazed thread and has a wire-like look and feel. Glazed cotton thread is not recommend for machine work because the glaze rubs off and gums up the machine. Although often not labeled as such, glazed cottons are recommended only for hand quilting.

Silk-finish This is not a silk-wrapped cotton. This is a nice sounding term for gassed cotton. See above.

Polished Another term for gassed cotton and occasionally for mercerized cotton.

Egyptian Cotton Egypt grows less than 1% of the world's cotton so it is obvious that all that "Egyptian" cotton in thread, sheets, clothing, and towels cannot be possible. Labels mislead. Some outright lie. As far as I can determine, we are the only company that can honestly say our cotton threads ([King Tut](#) and [MasterPiece](#)) are 100% Egyptian-grown extra-long staple, gassed, mercerized cotton. We buy our cotton from Egypt.