

[Fabric Information and Facts](#)

[Fabric Identification](#)

[Fabric Care](#)

[Natural Fibers](#)

[Wool](#)

[Cotton](#)

[Silk](#)

[Linen](#)

[Hemp, Ramie, and Jute](#)

[Man made or Manufactured](#)

[Fibers](#)

[Weaves](#)

[Q&A](#)

[Wisdom](#)

[Looking for Fabric](#)

[Looking for Sources](#)

[Projects](#)

[Overwhelmed? Site Map](#)

[Site Search](#)

[Site Info](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Tools for Sources](#)

Fabrics

FABRIC IDENTIFICATION

Burn Test - CAUTION. WARNING. BE CAREFUL! This should only be done by skilled burners! Make sure there is a bucket of water nearby and that you burn in a metal bucket or non-plastic sink.

To identify fabric that is unknown, a simple burn test can be done to determine if the fabric is a natural fiber, man made fiber, or a blend of natural and man made fibers. The burn test is used by many fabric stores and designers and takes practice to determine the exact fiber content. However, an inexperienced person can still determine the difference between many fibers to "narrow" the choices down to natural or man made fibers. This elimination process will give information necessary to decide the care of the fabric.

WARNING: All fibers will burn! Asbestos treated fibers are, for the most part fire proof. The burning test should be done with caution. Use a small piece of fabric only. Hold the fabric with tweezers, not your fingers. Burn over a metal dish with soda in the bottom or even water in the bottom of the dish. Some fabrics will ignite and melt. The result is burning drips which can adhere to fabric or skin and cause a serious burn.

Cotton is a plant fiber. When ignited it burns with a steady flame and smells like burning leaves. The ash left is easily crumbled. Small samples of burning cotton can be blown out as you would a candle.

Linen is also a plant fiber but different from cotton in that the individual plant fibers which make up the yarn are long where cotton fibers are short. Linen takes longer to ignite. The fabric closest to the ash is very brittle. Linen is easily extinguished by blowing on it as you would a candle.

Silk is a protein fiber and usually burns readily, not necessarily with a steady flame, and smells like burning hair. The ash is easily crumbled. Silk samples are not as easily extinguished as cotton or linen.

Wool is also a protein fiber but is harder to ignite than silk as the individual "hair" fibers are shorter than silk and the weave of the fabrics is generally looser than with silk. The flame is steady but more difficult to keep burning. The smell of burning wool is like

Household Chemicals

Several chemicals usually found in the home can help further identify fabrics. As in the burn test, caution should be used. Reactions between some of the fibers and household chemicals are rapid and could cause damage to surrounding surfaces.

Acetate is dissolved by acetone, an ingredient in nail polish remover and Super Glue. Caution should be used when wearing acetate or an acetate blend fabric and using any acetone containing product.

Fiber-Etch, a liquid used in embroidery or cutwork embroidery, dissolves any plant fiber including cotton, linen, and rayon.

Since this product removes plant fibers, it is also useful to determine fabric content. With blends of plant fiber fabrics, the blended fibers will remain. For example, a cotton/polyester fabric will, when this product is applied to a small area, remove the cotton fiber and leave the polyester fiber.

burning hair.

Man Made Fibers

Acetate is made from cellulose (wood fibers), technically cellulose acetate. Acetate burns readily with a flickering flame that cannot be easily extinguished. The burning cellulose drips and leaves a hard ash. The smell is similar to burning wood chips.

Acrylic technically acrylonitrile is made from natural gas and petroleum. Acrylics burn readily due to the fiber content and the lofty, air filled pockets. A match or cigarette dropped on an acrylic blanket can ignite the fabric which will burn rapidly unless extinguished. The ash is hard. The smell is acrid or harsh.

Nylon is a polyamide made from petroleum. Nylon melts and then burns rapidly if the flame remains on the melted fiber. If you can keep the flame on the melting nylon, it smells like burning plastic.

Polyester is a polymer produced from coal, air, water, and petroleum products. Polyester melts and burns at the same time, the melting, burning ash can bond quickly to any surface it drips on including skin. The smoke from polyester is black with a sweetish smell. The extinguished ash is hard.

Rayon is a regenerated cellulose fiber which is almost pure cellulose. Rayon burns rapidly and leaves only a slight ash. The burning smell is close to burning leaves.

Blends consist of two or more fibers and, ideally, are supposed to take on the characteristics of each fiber in the blend. The burning test can be used but the fabric content will be an assumption.

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