

# Material GIRL

**SILK** is gorgeous but storing and cleaning it takes extra effort.

**LINEN** is super durable and lovely too—if you know how to iron it right.

**WOOL** can be freshened up with steam between cleanings.

## One big secret to being a smart clothes shopper: Know your fabrics!

When you're shopping for clothes, you always look at the price tag. But what about the fabric tag, the one that tells you what the garment is made of? Or the care label? Knowing the fabric content can tell you a lot about how the garment will look and hold up over time. That can save you from buying something that will start to look tired after just a few wearings. Paying attention to the labels can also save you a bundle on dry cleaning.

We got the scoop on which fabrics wear well, which don't, and how to keep them all looking like new. Hint: The care label won't tell you everything you need to know, says Pat Slaven, our in-house textile expert. We also talked to Ingrid Johnson, a professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, and author and garment expert Steve Boorstein, aka The Clothing Doctor, and got their best tips for buying and caring for clothes. Then we bought five bargain-priced little black dresses. We inspected the fabric and details, and washed them to see how they held up. One shrank almost a whole size! Here you'll learn how to spot problems like that and many others—before you spring for that cute new outfit that seems like such a great deal.

MONICA BUCK: FASHION AND PROP STYLING: KIM FIELD

**CASHMERE** is easier and more affordable to care for than you might think.

**COTTON** is wash and wear. But watch the water temp!

## Best timeless fabrics



Cashmere

**PROS** Cashmere is soft and luxurious and more affordable than it used to be. Made from the fine undercoat fibers of certain types of Asian goats, it's more sturdy than it might look.

**CONS** It can pill or fuzz. And although it's more affordable than ever, it can still be pricey. And moths love it.

### CARE SECRETS

- Sweaters can be machine-washed on the gentle cycle, then laid flat to dry. Washing can actually be better for cashmere sweaters than dry cleaning. It makes the fibers fluff up a little. But always dry-clean coats and jackets.
- No wire hangers! (That rule applies to all your other clothes, too.)



Cotton

**PROS** It's soft. It breathes. It looks and feels great. Even better, more and more clothes are made out of organic cotton, which is grown without chemical pesticides. And more women's garments now come with wrinkle-resistant finishes.

**CONS** Unless it's "preshrunk," cotton can shrink. And if you don't hang cotton clothes up right after drying, you'll wind up with a wrinkled mess. Colored dyes can run, especially reds.

### CARE SECRETS

- Machine wash but keep it cool; dry and remove promptly.
- To maintain the shape of cotton clothing, it's best to let it air dry.



Linen

**PROS** It's durable. Linen is made from the fibers of the flax plant and is at about twice as strong as cotton.

**CONS** Linen is really wrinkle-prone. Set aside time to iron it right.

### CARE SECRETS

- You can dry-clean linen garments, but machine washing adds a nice softness. Intense colors can fade, though, so test an inconspicuous corner of fabric first. If a garment is soiled, it's probably safe to wash in warm water. But use bleach-free detergent and hang or lay the garment flat to dry. Linen tends to absorb lots of water, so wash only a few pieces at a time.
- For extra crispness, iron twice with a dry iron (turn steam off): first on the inside (when the fabric is still damp) and then on the outside. (See page 53 for our top iron picks and more tips.)



Wool

**PROS** Warm, soft, and super strong, wool is also nice because it hardly wrinkles at all.

**CONS** It can be expensive to buy and maintain. And moths find it irresistible.

### CARE SECRETS

- Dry-cleaning works best on wool but it's also washable. If you have a conventional top-loading washer, turn it into a bathtub that spins. Soak the sweaters in mild detergent for 15 minutes, rinse, then spin. Or if your machine has a hand-wash cycle, use that setting. Lay flat to dry.
- Spot-clean knits with a damp sponge; just make sure it's clean. If necessary, use a little dish soap and blot the wool garment with a white cloth.
- Hanging garments in a steamy bathroom will freshen wool so that it can go longer between cleanings.

## Best blends

### Cotton + polyester

**PROS** No ironing! It's also more durable than cotton alone. And today's poly blends with microfibers have

come a long way since the disco days. Shopping tip: Look for blends with 15 to 20 percent polyester, which gives you better durability and fit, but not more than 40 percent or you'll lose the benefits of cotton, including softness.

**CONS** Clothing can pill, because cotton is a short fiber and polyester is a long one. It's the mixing of different size strands that causes fabrics to pill.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Machine wash and dry on the permanent press setting.
- Turn garments inside out when washing to reduce pilling and fading.

### Cotton + spandex

**PROS** It has all the advantages of cotton with a touch of slimming stretchiness. Spandex makes for

a better fit, especially in spots that tend to sag, like the knees and rear end. Just a tiny bit of spandex, up to 6 percent or so, is all it takes. Any more and you'll look like you're wearing leggings.

**CONS** A garment that is part spandex can shrink over time or stretch out.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Machine wash and dry, just as if it were 100 percent cotton. But iron just a tad lower than the cotton setting. For blouses, sprinkle with water and iron while the fabric is a bit damp.
- Use color-safe bleach, even for whites; chlorine can damage spandex.

### Wool + polyester

**PROS** It's even more wrinkle-resistant than wool alone, and it holds a crease better. And it costs less

than 100 percent wool. Shopping tip: You're better off with a blend that's at least 60 to 65 percent wool so it looks and feels more like wool.

**CONS** The blend is actually warmer than wool, but since the fabric doesn't breathe, that can be uncomfortable. It tends to pill more than wool alone.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Follow the care label. Some blends have been chemically treated to make them washable.
- A wool-polyester blend can't take as hot an iron as wool alone does. So use the lowest setting.

## Best to avoid (usually)

### Polyester

**THE PROBLEM** Although this fabric is wrinkle-resistant, easy to care for, and not likely to stretch or shrink,

it doesn't breathe like natural fibers. The good news is that today's polyesters aren't as synthetic-feeling and -looking as the old double knits. Buying cute trendy tops made from wispy polyester is fine, but when it comes to staple pieces that you'll wear regularly, stick with natural fabrics like wool.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Machine wash in warm water and tumble dry on low heat.
- Treat oily stains fast, before they bond with the fabric and set in. And use Fels Naptha laundry soap (less than \$2 a bar, sold in supermarkets).

### Rayon

**THE PROBLEM** This "artificial silk" can be comfy and soft, and also drapes well. But it stains, shrinks,

stretches, wrinkles, and generally doesn't react well to being wet.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Most garments are dry-clean only. If you iron, first turn the garment inside out and use moderate heat.
- Never wring or twist rayon or you could damage the garment. If you hand wash, shake the water out and hang the item on a padded hanger to dry.
- Check the weather! If you get rayon wet, it can show water spots. To remove stains, try hand washing to even out the color—label instructions permitting. Otherwise, dry clean.

### Silk

**THE PROBLEM** While it's gorgeous and luxurious, cool in summer and warm in winter, and a lot stronger than

you might think, silk also wrinkles and stains easily, and fades in direct sun.

#### CARE SECRETS

- Dry-clean, but only as often as absolutely necessary. If it's prewashed silk, you can hand wash the garment.
- Never spot clean silk; you might leave a mark. Instead, take the item to the dry cleaner.
- To avoid fading, store silk garments in the back of the closet away from light. Fading around the edges of silk (or any fabric) might be caused by "fume fade" from your furnace. Caulk any cracks in the floor.

## What they're really made of

Ever wonder whether those inexpensive designer clothes at discount stores like Walmart and Target are just plain cheap? Using our fabric guide and paying attention to other details like seams, you can see for yourself. Also check out the next page for our analysis of five dresses we found for around \$50 or less, plus some tips on finding a cheap dress that's not cheaply made. Here's the scoop on some more high-end designers you'll find in lower-end stores this season.

#### ALEXANDER MCQUEEN AT TARGET (selected stores).

**The look** A one-time-only women's line including studded jeans, prom dresses, and tuxedo jackets.  
**Biggest price tag** \$129.99.

#### ANNA SUI AT TARGET

**The look** Dresses and tops inspired by the TV series "Gossip Girl."  
**Biggest price tag** \$70.

#### SONIA RYKIEL AT H&M

**The look** Ladylike lingerie and accessories. (This spring: a knitwear collection for women and girls.)  
**Biggest price tag** \$150.

#### VERA WANG AT KOHL'S

**The look** Elegant, understated women's dresses, pants, tops, shoes, boots, and jewelry.  
**Biggest price tag** \$300.

## KEEP CLOTHES FROM PILLING

There's no way to tell at a glance if a garment will pill. But there's one easy way to prevent those little balls from showing up: Sort laundry by texture. Wash smooth with smooth, fuzzy with fuzzy. Never toss sheets and towels in together!

## SMART CLOTHING-MAINTENANCE TIPS

Clothing fabrics are much better than they used to be. "The same advanced thinking that has given us GPS and smart phones is being applied to a new generation of textiles," says "The Clothing Doctor" Steve Boorstein. That means many of them are more likely to be wrinkle-free and stain-resistant. But you still need to put in some effort to keep clothes looking their best.

**Buy the right size.** Yes, even if it's not the one you usually wear. If a garment is too small, you'll stress the fabric every time you wear it.

**Save the hang tag.** It might have info the care label doesn't. And if the garment falls apart in the wash, you might be able to use it to return the item.

**Don't overclean.** Most clothes just don't get that dirty. You could dry-clean

some clothes just once a season, says Ingrid Johnson, a professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology. When machine washing clothes, use cooler water, shorter cycles, and the least detergent possible.

**Air dry.** The dryer can be hard on clothes because it bangs them around. After the washer's spin cycle, air drying won't take long.

**Hang it right.** Use wooden, plastic, or padded hangers, and close buttons, zippers, and hooks. Things will hold their shape much longer.

**Blot stains.** Use a dry white napkin or dish towel. Never rub; that can damage the fabric.

**Separate reds.** Dark dyes like red tend to be less colorfast than others, so always wash red garments separately.

**Spritz yourself first.** Apply perfume, makeup, and hair spray before you get dressed so that you don't stain fabrics.

**Store your clothes properly.** Off season, put things away in breathable (not nylon or plastic) garment bags, and never in those plastic bags from the cleaner's. Keep moths away from wools by storing in old pillowcases.



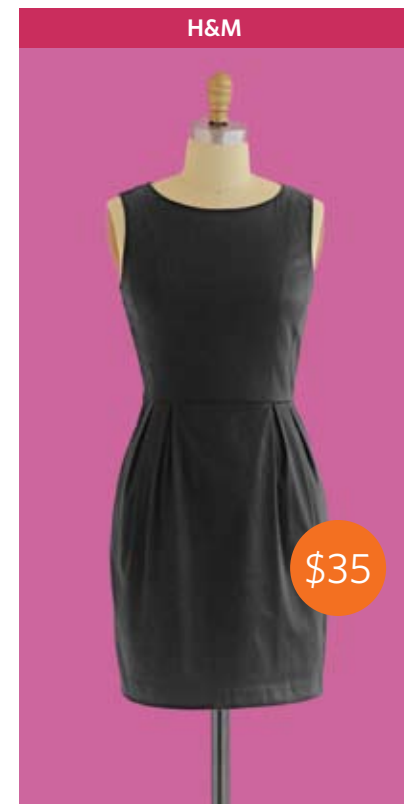
**ROLL IT** After hand washing, roll garments in a towel to soak up excess water.

# Which little black dress?

We put inexpensive LBDs to the test, looking at fabrics and more

All the discount stores now sell LBDs, and some are from big-name designers like Nicole Miller and Norma Kamali. So we bought dresses at five big-box stores and had our fabrics guru, Pat Slaven, assess them. She checked the garments' seams,

linings, and overall construction. Then we washed each frock five times according to the instructions to see how well they held up. The result: Cheap doesn't have to mean cheaply made. The dresses below are arranged from best to worst.

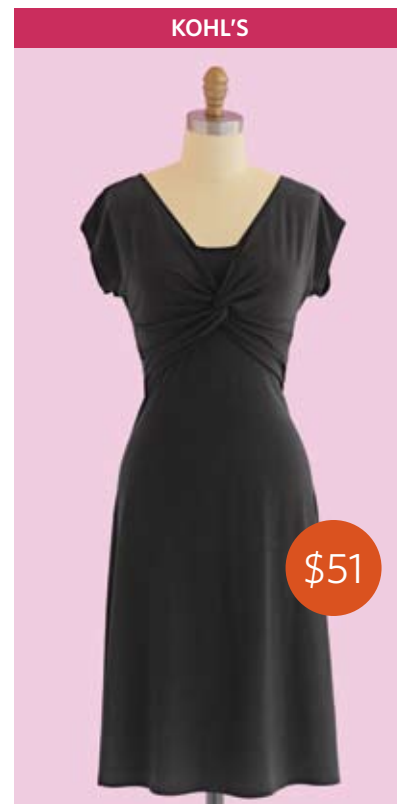


## H&M private label

**Fabric** 97% cotton, 3% elastane (spandex)

**Testers' notes** This dress was the best of the bunch. It's a cute fitted style with princess seams, a short hemline, and even invisible but usable pockets. It's made of sturdy cotton with just enough spandex for comfort. Plus it has finished seams, a well-sewn lining, and a boldly visible zipper with ample plackets (extra material inside so that it won't pinch your skin).

**Bummer** It needed a light ironing after machine washing.

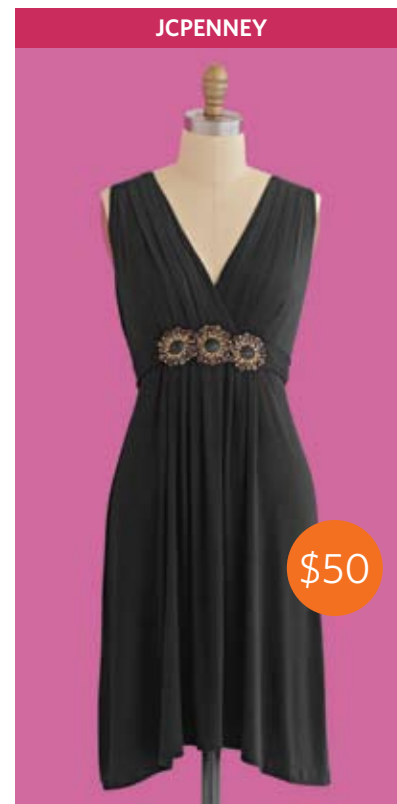


## Chaps by Ralph Lauren

**Fabric** 95% polyester, 5% elastane jersey

**Testers' notes** The Chaps dress was well made; all the seams were stitched and serged (which means reinforced). It's made of easy-wear, easy-care jersey material, so no ironing is needed. The built-in overlay with the waist tie is a very nice detail that makes this one stand out.

**Bummers** This dress cost a bit more than most of the others, and it's mostly polyester, so it doesn't look like a top-quality garment.

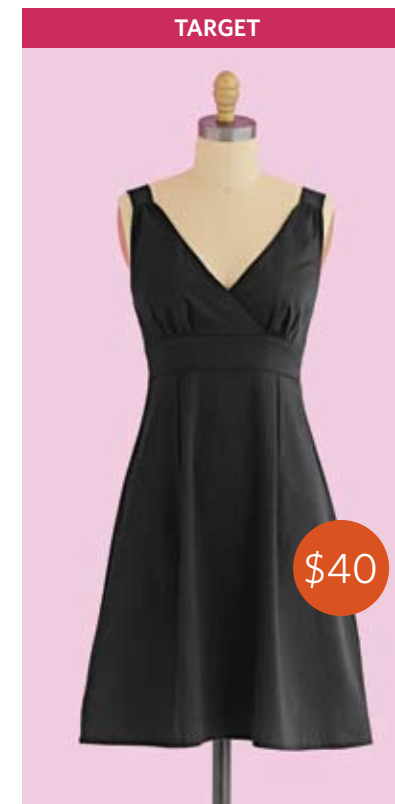


## Nicole by Nicole Miller

**Fabric** 95% rayon, 5% spandex jersey

**Testers' notes** Nicole Miller is known for her funky style, and the extra beading made this dress stand out (plus it came with extra beads for touch-ups). Tiny hidden fasteners hold bra straps so that they don't peek out. No ironing is always a big plus.

**Bummers** Up close the beads were sort of cheap-looking. The dress is made of temperamental rayon, so it had to be hand washed and hung to dry. And it shrank 3 percent in length, or just over an inch, and light streaks showed up.

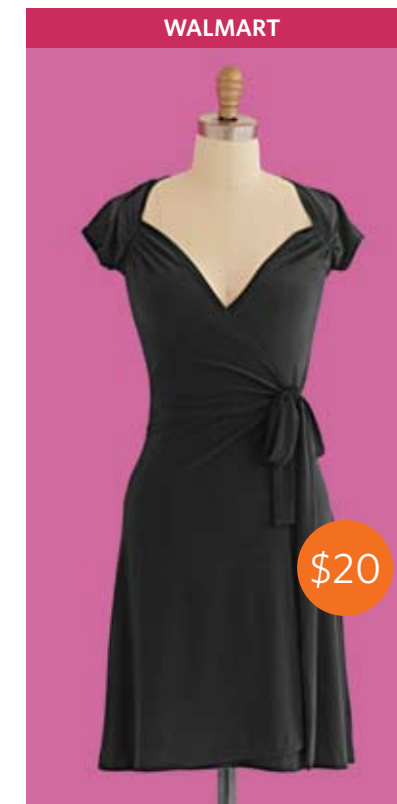


## Mossimo

**Fabric** 97% cotton, 3% spandex

**Testers' notes** This one is really cute—a modern-looking, stylish dress with quality details like a lined bodice and a hook-and-eye closure at the top of the zipper. It's mostly cotton, a comfy, cozy favorite that you don't have to dry-clean.

**Bummers** After five washings, the black color faded slightly. Even worse, the dress shrank 3.5 percent in width—or a full 1.5 inches across the hip—which is almost a whole dress size smaller.



## Norma Kamali

**Fabric** 94% polyester, 6% spandex jersey

**Testers' notes** You can't beat the price and you'll never need to iron this dress. You can practically roll it into a ball, then put it on and wear it. But it was the cheapest-looking and the worst-made of the bunch we tested.

**Bummers** The skimpy wrap style would be a challenge for any curvy woman (well, maybe with a cami underneath). There are few finished seams, and the hem's loose chain stitching unraveled even before we washed the dress.

Note: These exact styles may no longer be in stores.

## 5 SIGNS THAT IT'S WELL MADE

Watch for these clues to a quality dress, jacket, shirt, or other garment. Some are obvious, but others require a close look—inside and out.

■ **No loose threads.** Neatness counts. If there are dangling threads or "thread nests" (those little balls of thread you may find on the inside of a seam), you can be fairly certain that there are other construction flaws you can't see.

■ **Finished seams.** Seams that are already unraveling or look uneven probably won't hold up long term. Ideally, hems should be sewn with a blind hem stitch—you can't see it on the outside of the garment, and the stitches are tiny, neat, and even. On cheaper garments, hems are often finished with a chain stitch, which looks like loops or links of a chain and can easily unravel.

■ **A lining.** Not every garment needs a lining, but it's a sign of quality and helps dresses, especially, to hang better.

■ **Sturdy details.** Buttons should be sewn on tightly, zippers should have deep plackets (extra material over and under the zipper so that it won't show or pinch your skin), pockets should have reinforced stitching so that they won't rip when you put pressure on them, and so should the neckline, armholes, shoulders, and any other wear points.

■ **Little extras.** Look for a smoothly sewn-in tag that won't scratch and other bonus features such as extra buttons, thread, or beads for repairs. Noticeable little extras like those show that some care was put into making the garment.