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Getting the best from your sewing machine

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“Next to the plough, this is perhaps humanity’s most blessed instrument.”

(Louis Antoine Godey.)

In some homes the sewing machine is the most sadly neglected and ill-used servant. It is often left set up, exposed to dust, dampness and scratching, used as a table and otherwise abused. It is not right to have a machine stitching imperfectly and noisily and used for long periods without maintenance when a little attention can keep it performing quietly and efficiently.

GENERAL CARE OF MACHINE

A sewing machine is a very valuable article, worth the best possible care. Make a well-fitting, firm cotton cover to protect the cabinet. Never put heavy weights on the machine nor allow children to sit, or lean on it. Polish the woodwork with a good furniture cream and clean the iron framework occasionally.

Dust the machine before using and before putting away—put it down and cover it when not in use. To prevent deterioration of both woodwork and metal parts, keep machine away from strong heat and sunlight and moist air. Do not leave it near an open window.

If yours is an electric machine, coil cords loosely when putting it away. Keep foot control clean to prevent short-circuiting through dust. When not sewing, turn main switch off. Take care that the cord is not near the belt—it is possible for the belt to cut into the flex leaving bare wires showing.

USING THE MACHINE

To familiarise yourself with your machine, study the details in the instruction booklet. Follow the threading diagram for your type of machine, paying particular attention to threading between the tension discs. (It is easy to have the thread either behind or in front of the two discs instead of between them. It appears correctly threaded but will not stitch correctly). Have the takeup lever (the moveable hook above the needle) at its highest point when threading—if not it will take up extra cotton when rising and become unthreaded—and when removing work—if not it will be hard to draw work away and three threads will be seen coming through the needle hole.

Thread the needle from the grooved side (which can be felt with a fingernail). With a treadle machine, make sure that the belt is on before threading otherwise tangling may result. Set the bobbin in place and after drawing up the loop of thread from underneath, place both...
threads back between the division of the foot. The reel and bobbin threads should be the same thickness to ensure even stitching. Lower the presser-foot gently on to the material—start and stop stitching in the material.

Use the built-in thread cutter behind the needle. It is not wise to take scissors to the machine as they will scratch and chip the surface, or if left on the lap can be forgotten and on rising can fall and cause a nasty wound.

Avoid leaving pins in sewing, particularly on the underneath, as they can break or blunt the needle and scratch the machine. (Knots in tacking cotton can also break the needle). Stitch slowly over thick parts, helping the machine by turning the wheel by hand, to avoid damaging the needle.

Before stitching, check the threading of the machine and see that the needle is straight and sharp and that it and the presser-foot are tight. (Sometimes the thumb-screws become loose and the needle can come out and/or be broken on the presser-foot). A blunt needle splits the threads of the fabric and causes puckering—it is best discarded. Test the stitching on a doubled scrap of the same material before stitching on the garment.

Guide work through but do not push or pull as this results in an uneven tension and stitch. Keep the bulk of the material on the left-hand side of the machine. If there is a small light globe on the front avoid this as it becomes quite hot and can burn. In the case of delicate fabrics it can scorch, and with nylon even melt!

**TENSION AND STITCH SIZE**

These are two entirely different things, not to be confused one with the other. Tension is the pull or strain on the thread, necessary on both reel and bobbin thread to correctly form the stitch. Stitch size is merely the length of the stitch—the numbers at the side of the machine-head mean that each stitch is that fraction of an inch in length.

The bobbin tension is set in the factory and should not need much alteration. The tension on the reel thread needs adjusting each time a different thickness of thread and fabric is used. Detailed instructions and diagrams are in the instruction book for the machine. As a general rule, use a size 14 needle, 40 gauge cotton and about 12 stitches to the inch for normal household and family sewing. For very fine materials, change to a size 11 needle, 50 gauge cotton and 15 to 20 stitches to the inch. When sewing on thick materials put in a stronger size 16 needle, use 36 gauge cotton and only 8 or 10 stitches to the inch. The thicker materials will need a looser tension, and the finer materials may need a slightly tighter tension—test on scraps and adjust until the stitch is the same in appearance on both sides of the fabric.

**THE ATTACHMENTS**

In many machine drawers the attachments that came with the machine lie as yet untried still in their original wrapping. Next time you have a spare half hour, try some of them—you will probably be pleasantly surprised at what they can do. They are very easily attached and can save a lot of time particularly when hemming sheets and tablecloths and gathering skirts, frills, etc.

**CLEANING AND OILING THE MACHINE**

Regular maintenance is essential to keep the machine working quietly and efficiently with a minimum of wear. Remove all dust and fluff before oiling—clogged dust and oil can cause faults in stitching and increase wear. Use a soft camel hair brush when dusting into bobbin well. In particular, keep the bobbin case free from dust and fluff and well oiled—this is the hardest working part of the machine. Apply a drop of oil to all contacting moving parts and do not forget the wheels and treadle of the treadle type machine. See your instruction book for details.

Many an old machine thought to be useless has responded like magic to a thorough cleaning and oiling. If a machine has been very badly neglected, clean thoroughly then oil with paraffin and run rapidly, then wipe off the paraffin and oil with the recommended machine oil. Kerosene may be used first to help clean an old, unused machine, but wipe it away thoroughly as it may promote rusting.
MENDING WORKING CLOTHES

The following is in response to a reader's queries on this subject.

Trouser Hems.

As trouser cuffs on work clothes have only a nuisance value as sand and seed carriers they are best abolished! For work clothes the hem should be just above the ankle level so that it does not rub and wear against the top of the boot. When new, undo cuff if any and adjust the hem level, then attach a small leather protector inside the back and front where most wear occurs. (These protectors can be bought in chain stores, or half-inch strips can be cut from old kid gloves or slippers. Strips of felt could also be sewn on.)

To repair a worn hem that is the right length (i.e. if there is not enough to turn up to form a hem) trim the frayed edge then face it back invisibly using a three inch wide straight or bias strip of a similar material. Place right sides together and machine around half an inch from the edge, then turn facing to wrong side and hem or machine in place. Sew on a protecting felt or leather strip as above.

Darning.

For work clothes, machine darning gives a much stronger repair in much less time than hand-darning. Most machines have a reverse lever which can be stitched backwards or forwards and makes machine darning very quick and easy. Start half an inch from the left-hand side of the tear and gently pull the work sideways with the left hand while operating the lever with the right hand. Stitch both vertically and horizontally, along the straight grains, as puckering may result on the cross of the material. This is very handy for mending those little holes caused by barbed-wire fences. Long tears should be fishboned together by hand before machine darning. Continue the darning for at least half an inch past the tear in each direction.

Patching.

The knees of trousers are difficult to get at for machine mending, and it is worthwhile undoing a leg seam to enable the leg to be placed flat. Catch the edges of large tears by hand, then put patch on the right side. Make knee patches quite large to cover the thigh and skin area, and stitch across the patch diagonally to hold it flat against the leg.

When patched knees of trousers or overalls are wearing thin, another suggestion to prolong their life is to cut the legs off half an inch below the crutch seam and interchange them so that the firm parts at the back of the knees are placed to the front. Be sure to cut both exactly the same, and use a strong flat seam to join.

After a while, patches on work trousers sometimes come undone from the corners. This can be avoided by either rounding the corners or stitching diagonally across them several times as in machine darning. The sides of very large patches could be incorporated in the leg seams.

Next time new working clothes are needed the men on the farm should try buying all-in-one overalls instead of trousers and shirts. One good type has a double-ended front zipper and heavy duty press-studs at neck, waist and sleeve. In winter a shirt or woollen can be worn underneath, protected from dirt, and in summer the overalls are much cooler than tucked in shirt and belted trousers. They are easier to launder (particularly in winter when drying can take a long time), also to mend, and there are no frequent requests for buttons to be sewn on. If the banded sleeve is not desired, cut sleeve short or remove at the armhole. Unpick band and seam and keep for patching.
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