

Sheets: Wake-up call

Silk pillowcases that shred in the wash? Linen sheets so wrinkly after laundering that you might as well not bother making the bed? Sky-high thread counts based on creative calculating? Note to the makers of sheets in our tests: Stop sleeping on the job.

Much has changed in the bedding business. Tried-and-true names such as Cannon and Charisma are largely gone, a result of company bankruptcies. High-quality percale sheets--the kind we have recommended--are harder to find, too.

Instead, consumers are faced with high prices, unfamiliar brands, poor-wearing fabrics, and marketing that wrongly places a premium on the highest thread count. Standard sheets used to last years; some of those we tested don't even come close.

In short, we didn't find much to like among the 19 queen sheet sets we tested, which are priced from \$30 to \$385 and are found in bed-and-bath and department stores and online. They included trendy weaves such as sateen and satin, and nontraditional fibers such as polyester and modal, a cellulose fiber made from wood.



Unsuitable fabrics. In 20 launderings following the manufacturer's directions, the Domestications Washable Silk pillowcases were in shreds. The Linens 'n Things Home Brilliance Jersey knit sheets shrank so much after just five washings that they no longer fit the bed. Then there was the Cuddledown Heirloom Voile set, which is sheer. Who wants to see through to the mattress pad or pillow protector? Even the percale sheets in our tests were only fair for strength, typically a standout feature for percale.

Almost all the tested sheets needed ironing to look their best. Some of the unusual fibers require even more care. Silk needs delicate laundering. Sateen can rip on a toenail or cat's claw; satin can snag even on chapped hands.

Poor quality control. Fresh out of the package, a Bed Bath & Beyond sheet, now discontinued, was 10 inches shorter than it should be. With other sets, we discovered missing or torn components.

What-were-they-thinking design. Buttons on the DKNY Play pillowcases allow you to fit king-sized or queen-sized pillows. But you might greet the day with button imprints on your face. With the Domestications Washable Silk set, unseemly seams down the middle of the fitted sheet could haunt a restless sleeper.

Questionable claims. **Some manufacturers use creative math to boost thread count** (see [Thread counts](#)). Likewise, some sheets are labeled organic. But that simply means that the material is grown without pesticides. Federal regulations don't exist regarding the processing of the raw material, so all kinds of environmentally unfriendly chemicals could be used. "Natural" or "green" labeling may indicate that harsh chemicals such as formaldehyde or chlorine aren't used in processing. Without standards, though, there are no guarantees.

Some thread counts are bogus

Thread count is the new marketing mantra for sheets. The higher the better, you'll hear. But some sheet makers are boosting thread count simply by counting wrong.

The right way to count is to add up all vertical and horizontal threads in a square inch of fabric. Two hundred is typical and perfectly fine; 400 may provide a finer, softer sheet. Above 400, the only difference is likely to be price.

Our tests included some sheets listing thread counts of far more. The Lincsource Regency Collection, \$280 per queen set, claims a stunning 1,200.

Then we checked the math. Many sheet makers, including Lincsource, count plies—very thin yarns that make up a thread. We hired an independent textile lab to count threads. The actual count: 416. That's just 35 percent of what Lincsource claims.

Bottom line: Pick a sheet between 200 and 400 thread count that meets your other criteria. Paying more for higher thread count is wasting money.

Bedding basics

Combed cotton. Fibers are combed and the short ones are removed. The process makes the fabric smoother.

Egyptian. Cotton grown only along Egypt's Nile River.

Jersey. A plain knit fabric.

Linen. Fiber made from the flax plant.

Modal. Cellulose fiber similar to rayon.

Percal. Cotton or cotton-polyester plain-weave fabric with equal or similar vertical and horizontal thread counts.

Pima. Cotton grown primarily in the Southwest.

Plain weave. The simplest weave structure: single vertical and horizontal threads woven under and over.

Polyester. A synthetic fiber.

Sateen. Smooth, fairly glossy fabric in which the horizontal threads are woven over four or more vertical threads.

Voile. A plain-weave, sheer fabric usually used for curtains or blouses.

How to choose

Focus on fiber. Traditional cotton remains your best choice for sheets that combine easy care, comfort, and durability. If you're a stickler for sheets that look their best and you don't want to iron, look for cotton-polyester blends.

Note fit and construction. For the new, thicker mattresses, we found that buying bigger is best. If your mattress is 18 inches thick, choose sheets that claim 20 inches, to avoid pop-off corners.

Look for elastic all around the edges of a fitted sheet. Elastic along each side of the sheet is second best. Elastic in the corners only is the last choice. Check the seams on the wide hem of the top sheet and on the pillowcases. Stitches should be tidy, tight, and fairly small.

Never mind thread count. Thread counts between 200 and 400 are fine. Within that range, a higher number may provide a softer feel. With counts over 400, the main difference is price.

Guard against poor quality. In the store, make sure all pieces of the set are there and in good condition. With darker fabrics, buy and set aside extra pillowcases that can document color changes in laundering over time. That's especially important if you're buying coordinating bedding or accessories. Keep receipts and ask for your money back if the sheets fade after laundering or do not otherwise hold up.