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Appliances | Washer and dryer maintenance

Steps to keep your washer/dryer spinning

Control lint and moisture and don't overload your machines.

BY JOHN SHULTZ
Special to The Star

You never — OK, rarely — overload your washer, and you religiously clean out your dryer's lint trap in between loads. That should do it, right? How much maintenance do your old reliable appliances really need?

A little bit more than that if you want your washer/dryer running at top efficiency. The good news: Nothing the experts recommend will cost much in the way of time or elbow grease. The better news: Taking simple precautions can save you a few hundred dollars in periodic repairs and give you the peace of mind that when you absolutely, positively need to do a load, you'll be able to.

Keeping your washer/dryer in top running shape begins from the first day of ownership, said Celia Kuperszmid-Lehrman, deputy home editor for Consumer Reports.

"Start strong," she said. "Do research on which brands are the most repair-prone and which ones are the least ... and install the washer on a level and well-supported subfloor to prevent vibration and banging."

Also consider how you're venting your dryer, Kuperszmid-Lehrman said. She recommended replacing flexible plastic or foil exhaust ducting with smooth or flexible metal ducting to help prevent lint from getting trapped in the duct.

Once you're up and running properly, there are a few good preventative measures you can take to keep your appliances in good shape.

"With washers, the most important thing is not to overload the appliance," advised Roy Berendsohn, senior home editor at Popular Mechanics. "Laundry should be layered into the wash tub, not stuffed in."

Experts and manufacturers also stress the importance of not overdoing it with the detergent, and make sure that your high-efficiency-rated machine gets only the HE-rated detergent.



Front-load washer doors can trap moisture and debris that can cause mold and odor, experts say. Keeping the door ajar between loads is a critical step to keeping your washer clean.

Resources

- **Popular Mechanics:** popularmechanics.com
- **Consumer Reports:** consumerreports.org
- **GE:** geappliances.com/appliances/washer-dryer.htm
- **Whirlpool's Institute of Fabric Science:** instituteoffabricscience.org
- **RepairClinic:** repairclinic.com

Keep odor out

Want to prevent musty odors in a front-loading washer? Julie Wood, a GE spokeswoman, offers these tips:

- Use only the recommended amount of high-efficiency detergent.
- Do not leave wet items in the washer.

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Even if you don't have a high-efficiency machine, select the detergent and water level appropriate to the size and soils of the load to prevent over-sudsing and potential residue build-up, said Tremitchell Wright, with Whirlpool's Institute of Fabric Science.

As for dryers, "we can't overemphasize the importance of cleaning the lint screen after every load," Berendsohn said. "This ensures better air movement and dryer efficiency and reduces the likelihood of causing a lint fire."

Another helpful tip: If you're drying back-to-back loads, try to start the second while the dryer is still hot. That cuts down on energy use and a little bit of wear-and-tear.

Routine maintenance requires a little more effort.

For your dryer, lint is the key.

Experts recommend keeping an eye on the dryer's outlet vent, as all sorts of critters have been known to build nests in them. Manufacturers provide a variety of caged and gated vents to tackle just such an issue, but that doesn't always prevent the problem.

Also, "if you're mechanically knowledgeable, you should regularly remove the dryer's front panel to vacuum out lint inside the appliance and clean away any lint that has accumulated around the moisture-sensing switch," Berendsohn said.

If you're not so inclined, "have your dryer serviced once a year to remove lint from inside the appliance. This reduces dryer run time, improves safety and efficiency and increases your peace of mind."

Another key — and very simple step — make sure you check the bottom of the washer tub for loose change, paper clips, screws or anything else that may have made its way out of a piece of clothing.

Experts also suggest annually removing any grit from the screens where the hoses attach to the water supplies. Detergent dispensers should be regularly cleaned, and some manufactures recommend running the machine through a cycle empty with bleach added to the works.

Whirlpool's Wright said, "We recommend cleaning your washer once a month, using products like Affresh washer cleaner tablets, which help to remove and prevent odor-causing residue build-up in all brands of high-efficiency washers."

Front-loading washers can bring with them their own particular challenges.

Chris Hall, president of RepairClinic.com, said the seal can create some problems with front-load washers.

"Front-load washers seal more tightly when closed, which means mold has a better chance to grow," he said. "Dirty, soapy water inevitably splashes onto the seal, gets into the folds and sits there. Manufacturers have begun engineering little weep holes in the seals to let that water drain, but it doesn't solve the entire problem."

Hall recommends wiping the folds of the door seal with a mild bleach and water solution every couple of weeks and running an empty load with bleach every six or so months.

Keeping the door ajar between loads is another critical step to keeping your washer clean.

Whirlpool's Wright said that U.S. consumers' increasing taste for cold water washes can "also allow for greater residue build-up. Washing clothes, and your washer, in warm or hot water can naturally inhibit residue growth."

Hall said that consumers shouldn't be scared away from front-loaders.

"The greater efficiency of the design has a couple of drawbacks," he said. "Nevertheless, in their lifetime, they will save enough energy to completely pay for themselves."

All maintenance advice, naturally, comes with one caveat: Observe the guidelines provided by your appliance's manufacturer. Maintenance needs, after all, can differ based by model.

Say you do your best; you clean and maintain, wash sensibly sized loads, and follow manufacturers' advice to the letter. And the machine still breaks down.

- Leave the door slightly open when the machine is not in use.
- Once a month, run an empty cycle to clean the inside of your washer.

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Repair or replace? What are the best rules of thumb?

“Our basic advice for products that need professional repair: Replace when the repair would cost more than half the price of a comparable new product,” Kuperszmid-Lehrman said.

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