

Today's Textiles - Buying Towels

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Towels aren't just for drying after a bath anymore! Today's manufacturers have developed a wide array of products that not only serve their function in drying, but also serve as decorating accent pieces, plus provide us with a little extra luxury. How many towels does one family need? Towel recommendations include four bath towels, four hand towels, and four washcloths per bathroom, as well as two bath mats and two bath rugs. How much do we pay for all of these luxuries? Bath towels can cost anywhere from \$2 to \$25 or more per towel. The average household pays \$7 for a bath towel and owns and uses 15 bath towels.



What are the most important factors for consumers when buying towels? According to Cotton Incorporated's Lifestyle Monitor Home Fabrics Study, softness is number one, closely followed by absorbency. When buying towels, heavier cotton towels seem to be the preference of most consumers. New options such as fiber blends and germ fighting finishes are now entering the market.

Making Sense of Sizes

Towels come in a variety of sizes to fit a variety of needs. Basic towel uses and average sizes are as follows:

Wash Cloth (12" X 12")

Fingertip Towel (11" X 18") - guest towel used for decorative purposes

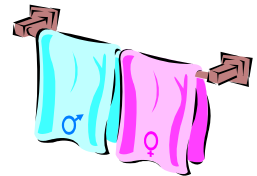
Dish Towel (12" X 24") - kitchen linen

Hand Towel (16" X 27")

Bath Towel (24" X 50")

Bath Sheet (35" X 68") - larger bath towel, sometimes called a spa towel

Bath Mat (20" X 30")



Fiber Sense

So, what makes one towel better than another? How can two towels marked "100% cotton" be so different? Many factors go into the quality of a towel. Fiber content is the first consideration.

When shopping for towels, consumers will find the majority of towels on the market to be 100% cotton. This is because cotton is one of the most absorbent and comfortable fibers available - ideal qualities for a towel. Cotton can absorb 7-8 times its own weight in water.



Cotton also has high absorbency - the ability to move moisture through its surface, and away from the body. The type of cotton used, however, can change some of the towels characteristics. The label of most cotton towels will read simply 100% cotton. These products are referred to as using "standard" cotton, and produce a good quality towel. Others may offer a further description of the type of cotton used. These towels are often made of premium cotton and are usually higher quality and priced towels. They don't however; make a towel thicker or heavier.

Egyptian and Pima cotton towels are made of varieties of cotton grown that have long, strong fibers that are particularly lustrous and absorbent. Egyptian cotton is grown along the Nile River, while Pima cotton is grown in the southern U. S. Supima is the trademark name for pima cotton.

Microfiber will be shown on the label of 100% cotton towels utilizing low micronaire or very fine fibers that are usually longer than average cotton fiber. The fine size of the fiber requires slower processing speeds to prevent damage. Yarns made from fine fiber result in more fibers per cross-section, which in turn produces stronger yarns.

Other fibers such as polyester or rayon are occasionally found blended with cotton to produce towels. These synthetic fibers are usually spun into yarns and used in only the background fabric for strength, durability, and to reduce shrinkage. The loop of the towel is all cotton.

Weaving Sense

Why does one cotton towel feel and work so much better than another cotton towel? Often times it is due to the towel's weave. The drying ability of a towel is a combination of the absorbency and density of the yarns. The term **terry cloth** is the common name of the fabric of most towels in the U. S. Terry cloth is a pile woven fabric, meaning that it is woven with one or more extra sets of yarns in the lengthwise direction to create the pile or loops. Think of a pile fabric as a fabric woven with actual height, such as velvet, corduroy or terry cloth. In some of these pile fabrics, the loops formed when weaving are shaved - with a terry product they are left on. More loops of cotton mean a greater surface area for the loops to absorb water. Looped pile is also better able to withstand the strain of rubbing, pulling, twisting, and tugging by the user. These terry loops seem to act as small sponges to remove water from the body. By using finer yarns, such as Egyptian cotton, manufacturers can weave more loops. This greater absorbency makes the towel user feel drier. The highest quality terry products consist of more yarns used in the background fabric, and very close loops packed in the pile. Manufacturers may also use two-ply yarn to also increase thickness and absorbency. It is important to remember that fiber content is still important. A heavy towel made with coarse yarns usually provides fewer loops and less absorbency.



Velour is a term used to describe any size towel that has normal terry loops on one side, but is sheared very closely on the other side. This sheared side often looks like velvet and makes a very pretty, soft towel. This sheared side, however, is very limited in its absorbability and often leaves the user feeling still damp. By creating a towel with loops on one side and shearing on the other, consumers gain the beautiful velour side to display, and the looped side to utilize. The velour side is also more susceptible to linting.

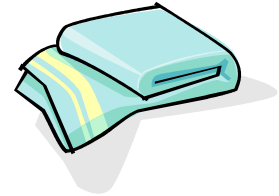
Jacquard towels have an actual patterned structure. The woven yarns are controlled to make an intricate design. These towels tend to be more expensive due to elaborate loom preparation needed before weaving.

Flat or Turkish toweling is desired by many consumers when working in the kitchen because they are virtually lint-free. These towels are usually constructed with a non-pile flat weave. Other heavier weaves are available, such as the waffle (raised) weave, huckabuck or twill weaving, which aid in drying with these non-terry towels. They may have added features such as appliqué, embroidered or printed areas for cosmetic purposes only.



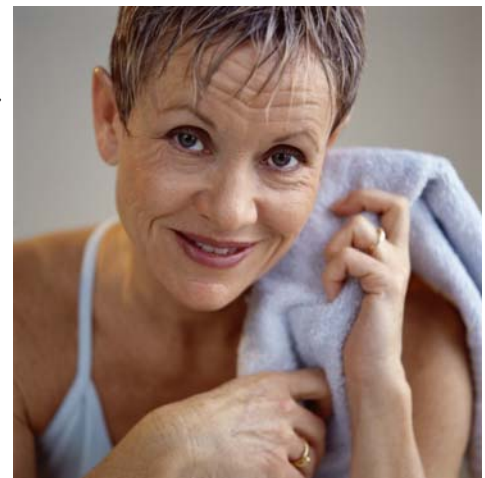
Final Indicators of Quality

Several other factors need to be considered when selecting towels. Review the towel's selvage and hemmed edges. Both should be neat and unpuckered. A decorative edge or border may be added. These "dobby" borders are very appealing to consumers, and add a more luxurious look to a towel. Fringe is another edge option, as well as embroidered accents or other decorative trims such as lace or monograms. Be sure to read the care label, however, as some decorative accents are dry clean only!



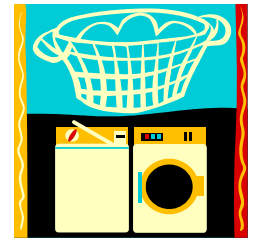
Most towels on the market today are first quality. "Seconds" are available at discount or outlet stores, but must be indicated, usually by having "second" stamped on the label, or having the label cut. These towels are fine to use, as they do not have any rips or tears, but simply have cosmetic defects such as a few missed or pulled loops or an error in the printed design.

New on the market - germ fighting towels!
Some manufacturers are infusing their fibers to avoid bacteria, mold and mildew growth.



Care Sense

After buying the perfect towels, it is important to care for them correctly. All towels should be washed before the first use to remove starches added at the mill. Most towels call for machine washing, warm water, with regular cycle. Those with decorative features often require gentle washing with cool water. Wash same color towels together, and avoid bleeding by washing dark towels separate from lighter ones. Remember not to wash anything with hooks or sharp edges with towels or they may pull out some of the towel loops. Often consumers like to bleach their white towels to keep them sparkling. Remember to do this only when necessary, as *bleach will damage and weaken fibers* and eventually cause rips and holes.



How often should towels be washed? This is a personal preference—some individuals wash them every day, and some once or twice a week. If towels are hung to dry immediately after use, they can be used more than once without concern. Most individuals prefer to wash hand towels or washcloths more often than bath towels.

Many consumers love to use fabric softener to keep their towels very fresh and soft. Over-use of these products does not result in an ideal towel. Excessive build-up and towel roughness can occur if consumers add more fabric softener than recommended.

Linting can be another problem when caring for towels. It is best to wash all towel loads together. Avoid linting by washing towels of similar colors in the same load, and avoid washing with other items that may be damaged from lint transfer, such as fleece products or items with sharp edges.



When drying towels, remember that the thicker, more absorbent towel you have, the longer it will take to dry!

Sources:

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Good Housekeeping
www.lovetoknow.com
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***Bleach will
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Fibers!***