

SHOW ME THE LABELS

We all love to keep our clothes looking their best and that can be very daunting when you have lost the laundry care instructions, or can't remember what those dots on the iron mean.

Here we explain the most common labels you will come across and guide you through the pros and cons of buying a new steam iron.



Hand-washing

If the tub contains a hand, wash the item by hand at 40°C or lower.

The hand-wash programme is for delicate garments (e.g. cashmere or silk), and washes more gently than the normal setting to prevent clothes snagging or shrinking.



Washing synthetics and woolens

The bars underneath the tub refer to rinsing and spinning.

If there are no bars, the garment can be spun and rinsed as normal.

One bar indicates that the spin speed should be reduced.

Two bars means the clothes need a mild wash action, but can be spun and rinsed normally.

Such items shouldn't be wrung by hand.

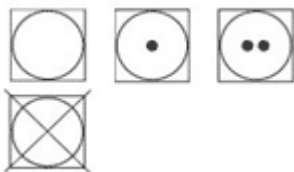


Ironing

The dots on ironing symbols correspond to the dots on an iron's temperature settings.

The more dots there are the more heat can be applied.

Three dots are for linen and cotton, two dots are for synthetics, one dot is for the most delicate items such as woolens and silk.



Tumble drying

Getting tumble drying right is easy if you use the correct temperature.

A circle inside a square means you can tumble dry the garment. The dots indicate temperature - one for lower heat, two for higher heat.

A cross over the symbol means you shouldn't tumble dry the garment.

Some clothes appear similar but have different labels - they're most

likely made from different fibres or blends.

Some fibres or blends can change size or become 'furred' by tumble drying.

An item that's suitable for tumble drying will have been treated to protect against these effects.



Dry cleaning

Some clothes can - or must - be dry cleaned.

A circle means the garment is suitable for dry-cleaning.

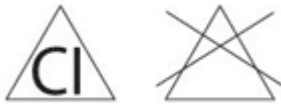
If there's a letter inside the circle, it's to tell the dry-cleaner which chemical wash and method to use.

If the circle has a cross over it, the item shouldn't be dry-cleaned.

Clothes manufacturers tend to give good cleaning advice.

So, even if you suspect they're being over-cautious, it's best to follow what they say.

Fabrics tend to be more delicate these days, which is why you see more dry-clean-only items.



Bleaching

A triangle means you can safely use a cold, diluted solution of bleach.

If the triangle has a cross over it, the item can't be bleached

How to buy the best steam iron



Ironing is a chore most of us want to get out of the way as quickly and easily as possible - and investing in a decent steam iron can really help minimise the time you'll have to spend on this household task.

A regular steam iron uses a built-in water tank to generate steam to take the creases out of shirts, skirts and t-shirts - unlike a steam generator iron, which has a separate water tank.

Steam iron pros and cons

Pros

- Quick to heat up
- Cheaper than steam generator irons
- Smaller and easier to store
- Suitable for shorter ironing sessions.

Cons

- Not as powerful as steam generators
- Can be heavier to use
- Not as fast as steam generators at getting through piles of ironing
- Some poorly performing steam irons won't work as effectively at lower temperatures.

Steam iron brands

Tefal, Rowenta, Morphy Richards, Philips and Russell Hobbs are all household names associated with steam irons - but you'll also find own-brand steam iron models available in supermarkets and stores.

Steam iron features

At first glance you'd be forgiven for thinking all steam irons were pretty much the same - but take a closer look at the functions and features different steam irons offer to make sure you pick out the best one.

Cleaning and descaling

Steam iron performance can be severely hampered by the build-up of limescale over time, so it's worth checking how easily your iron can be cleaned. Some come with anti-calcium cartridges or self-cleaning systems, for example.

Enhanced steam iron features

Steam shot buttons, button notches, directional water spray, vertical steam to steam curtains, easy-glide soleplates... Extras like these can make all the difference when you're choosing the best steam iron for your needs.

Think about which iron features you want, and take the time to check what's available on each model - that way you'll get the gadgets you need, and won't end up paying extra for the ones you'll never use.

Cable length

Most steam irons come with a three-metre cord - but they can vary, so check the length before you buy. A short power cord can affect your ability to manoeuvre your iron effectively.



Look for steam iron features like auto-shut off or non-stick soleplates

Safety

An iron with 'auto shut-off' can give you peace of mind. This function turns the iron off after a pre-determined time period if the iron hasn't moved, or is face down for too long - reducing the risk of an accident.

Steam iron prices

You can buy a steam iron fairly cheaply these days. Prices for basic models start at less than €15, and go

up to around €100 for top-of-the-range models - and even more for a steam generator iron.

Cordless steam irons

Cordless steam irons aren't widely available in Ireland and the UK yet. In the meantime, your best option is a steam iron that's been designed to ensure the cord won't get tangled up as you work.

Some steam iron cords are connected via a 'ball and socket' swivel that keeps the cord out of the way while you're ironing.

Ironing extras

Steam irons can make ironing easier, but there are other ways to get even better results - take a look at our advice on buying the best ironing board

Steam iron reviews: Ironing boards

A good ironing board is a home essential. Get it wrong and you could find yourself ironing creases into clothes instead of out.

With so many boards on the market, it can be tricky to find the definitive one. So we asked three ironers of varying ability to try out a selection using a steam iron and a generator. Here's what you should look for - and what you should avoid.



Opt for a mesh board with a padded, metalized cover

Type of ironing board

Mesh is the board of choice for our ironing experts. Happily, this type is also the most common on the market. The mesh allows the steam to pass through, delaying the inevitable soggy cover so you won't end up ironing your twentieth shirt in a pool of water.

Ironing board covers

Thick padding gives a smooth surface for ironing and the top cover is less likely to slip. Look for a metalized cover: it will reflect some of the heat, helping to press the underside of your clothes while you iron on the top side.

Covers may be completely metalized, have a metalized underside, or a metalized layer in the middle.

Attaching the cover

The cover should fit the ironing board snugly without moving around. Elastic straps under the centre of the board will keep the cover taut - just be careful they don't catapult when you detach or reattach them.



Asymmetrical ironing boards make it easier to iron shirts

Size and shape

A narrow or short board has one basic drawback: you'll need to reposition a garment more often during ironing. Larger boards are simply easier to use for larger items.

On longer boards you're more likely to place the iron directly on the board (rather than the rest) when working at the pointed end, which adds to wear and tear on the cover. The ironing area of boards in our test varied from 33cm x 96cm, to 44cm x 145cm.

Look for a board with a narrow point if you want to iron into tight corners, like the shoulders of a shirt. The Vileda Park & Go ironing board has an asymmetrical point that's particularly helpful if you iron right-handed.

Ironing board legs

Scissor-action legs are the norm. Look for a wide footprint for stability, especially if you're ironing with a generator at one end.

Feet that form a T, or are joined by a bar at the bottom, are less likely to splay over time under the weight of a heavy steam generator. The longer the bar, the better the board's sideways stability - handy if you're ironing duvet covers.



Some iron rests can be removed for extra space

Iron rest

Not every ironing board copes under the weight of a heavy generator as well as it does with a steam iron.

Metal iron rests are common, but some droop under the weight of a generator. Boards with a 'parking area' in place of a metal rest are sturdy and provide a longer surface to iron on.

If you always place the iron on the cover you may find the fabric wears over time. Some boards have a removable iron rest for versatility - sparing your cover when in use, but providing extra board space for ironing if you prefer.



Folding boards take up less storage space

Ironing board extras

Folding boards

Good for storage in a small space. Setting up was rather laborious, though, requiring lots of unfolding, turning and clipping of the various parts to make it ready for use.

Curved legs

There's space for you to sit at the ironing board, as the legs curve away from your knees. But you'll need to iron with the iron rest on your right.

Child lock

A crude device, but it does the job. A ball fits over the release lever, holding it in place so the lever can't be activated.

Extension cable

Cables on irons can be shorter than two or three metres. A board with an extension attached means you can iron further from the wall socket.



Ironing board height markers make setting up easier

Height setting

If you're the only one in the house who does the ironing, this is handy. Open the board to your desired height and screw the marker into position. Whenever you open the board, it'll drop to your set height.

Other features

Ironing boards can come with sleeve boards, shelves for ironed clothes, rails or notches where you can hang ironed clothes, and cable holders to keep the cable out of your way while ironing. We found their benefits negligible, but if they interest you, look out for them.

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