



THE WORLD OF KNITWEAR FABRICS: A 4-PART WEB SERIES

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Knitwear should be a staple in anyone's wardrobe. After all, it was Coco Chanel who introduced it to the world as designer fashion in 1916, and a girl's closet hasn't been the same since. The comfortable, easy-to-wear and care for fabric is available in a variety of patterns, styles and weights.

But when it comes to *sewing* knit fabric, it can be daunting to work with if you're a beginner. When selecting the type of knit you want to use for your project, consider the fabric's stretch factor. Generally, the tighter the stretch, the easier the stitch. Knits are usually classified by their stretch factor: Firm, Moderate, Two-way and Super.

This four-part series reviews the various knit stretch styles, their common uses and what you can expect when you get behind your sewing machine to sew knit fabric.

PART 1: FIRM STRETCH

You can expect very little stretch from this category – up to about 20% across the grain. Firm stretch fabrics have a medium to heavy weight to them and include double knit, sweatshirt knit and boiled wool.

Double Knit – Its identifying feature are tiny ribs that look the same on either side of the fabric. Popular in the 70s for pantsuits, you can revitalize the look today with modern patterns for skirts, dresses and jackets using vintage and unique fabrics. In fact, double knit is great for coats because of its durability and heavy weight feel that lends itself to warmth.

Sweatshirt Knit – You know sweatshirt knit when you see it – smooth vertical ribs on the right side and a soft fluffy surface on the wrong side. This is also called sweatshirt fleece, and it's the same as knit but not to be confused with its stretchier cotton fleece cousin. Sweatshirt knit is easy to work with and great for cool-weather sportswear, like pants, jackets and of course sweatshirts.

Boiled Wool – This fabric is made from mechanical knitting then washed for shrinkage. It's generally very soft. Boiled wool is often used for scarves, hats, jackets and other cold weather garments as well as for dress fabric.



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PART 2: MODERATE STRETCH

When you think of knit fabric, this style might be the one that comes to the forefront of your mind because you're probably thinking of t-shirts, which fall into this category if they're made with single knit fabric. You can expect a comfortable, light to medium weight fabric that stretches 25-35% (sometimes up to 50%) across the grain. Moderate stretch fabrics include single knit, cotton jersey knit, tricot, double-napped cotton fleece, interlocking knits, velour and stretch velvet.

Moderate stretch fabric is available in a variety of unique and vintage prints and patterns, and it's easy to photograph and view online for purchase.

Single Knit (Cotton Jersey Knit) – The identifying feature of its look is that the ribs appear vertical on the front side and horizontal ribs on the opposite back side. Lightweight cotton jersey knit is best known for the ever popular t-shirt, but it's used for casual wear like tops, dresses, skirts, plastic-waist pants and shorts and pajamas. Single knit is soft enough to use as baby fabric.

Tricot Knit – Very thin knit that resists runs, so it's great for underwear and lingerie. Tricot knit is a warp knit, which means the ribs on the front and the back are parallel instead of perpendicular as seen in single knit fabrics.

Double-napped Cotton Fleece – This versatile, easy to sew fabric is a winter weather mainstay. The double napping makes it soft on both sides and gives the garment a lofty feel. This is great for items like warm pajamas, sportswear, blankets, scarves, hats, gloves, sweatshirts, dresses, jackets and vests.

Interlocking Knits – If you like to drape, interlocking knits can be your best friend. Its lightweight feel lends itself to versatile draped or conforming garments. While the edges don't curl, be mindful of runs on the crossgrain. Identifiable with a fine rib on both sides, you can use interlocking knits for just about anything: dresses, tops, pants, shorts, skirts, socks, hats, gloves and pajamas, as well as baby clothes and diapers.

Velour and Stretch Velvet – While both of these come in a variety of weights and have a soft brushed nap on the right side, they still have pretty moderate stretch to them. We've all seen shiny velvet; its cousin velour is just a bit less shiny but very similar. The desired look is up to you. Velour and stretch velvet are often used for dressier garments like tops, skirts and dresses; however, it's now becoming a popular fabric for sweatpants and matching lightweight jackets.



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PART 3: TWO-WAY STRETCH

We're getting into stretchier territory now. If you need fabric for sewing a swimsuit, leotard or a form-fitting garment that "gives," then look for two-way stretch. You can stretch two-way knits 50-75% in the lengthwise or crosswise direction. While moderate and firm stretch fabrics can generally be made of 100% natural fibers, if your garment requires added flexibility you are going to need to incorporate synthetic fibers to provide the stretch, such as Lycra®. However, two-way stretch fabrics can still be made of 100% natural materials, like a cotton sweater knit.

Lycra is the brand name for the synthetic fiber spandex, invented by DuPont in 1958, that is interwoven into fabrics to provide added stretch and flexibility. The greater the percentage of Lycra used in a fabric will produce a stretchier fabric. Lycra has revolutionized the fashion industry because it helps clothes keep their shape – especially when it's essential for the use of the garment, like a bathing suit. Before Lycra, people just accepted baggy clothing.

In addition to wearable items, two-way stretch fabric can be incorporated into interior and theatrical design. That's not just a bathing suit, it's a movie screen!

Sweater Knits – Available in a variety of weights, textures and fibers, this knit fabric group can also include novelty knits. Depending on the gauge of the knit and the material of the fabric, the degree of stretch will vary. Just put on a sweater made of 100% cotton or wool and you can judge the stretch yourself. Sweater knits are appropriate for pull-over sweaters, cardigans, vests, dresses, ponchos, tunics, twin sets, pull-on skirts, undergarments and outer wear accessories like hats, scarves and gloves, as well as purses and bags

Cotton Lycra Knit – Cotton Lycra knit fabrics are generally thin and are primarily stretchable on the crosswise grain. Being that it's a flexible and versatile fabric, it's often used to construct leotards, activewear, leggings, form-fitting tops, skirts and dresses and sometimes swimsuits (although don't confuse this material with the shinier and fully synthetic Nylon-Lycra blend that is most popular for women's swimsuits). Cotton Lycra knits are also available in denim – great for the skinny jean trend.



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PART 4: SUPER STRETCH/4-WAY STRETCH

If you are looking for crazy, all-around stretch, look no further. The 4-way stretch knit fabric is definitely one of the trickier fabrics for sewing because it can stretch 100% in one or more directions, but it is one that is a vital part of just about anyone's wardrobe. Swimsuits, actionwear, snow skiing apparel and sportswear are all made possible and improved because of Lycra and its natural fiber cousin, latex (aka rubber). Note that if you have a latex allergy, then you should avoid wearing clothes made with latex, including latex knits. It would also be important to clearly indicate that a garment is made using latex within the fibers if you are making the garment for someone other than yourself.

Rib Knit – Rib knits can be made of any fiber and do not always incorporate or depend on synthetic materials to create its stretch. The stretch is, in fact, due to the knit technique itself because the vertical ribs alternate on both sides of the fabric. Rib knits stretch 100% on the *crosswise* grain. Rib knits create a versatile finishing fabric for necklines, waistbands, cuffs, armholes and hemlines because the edges do not curl. Rib knits are also used for form-fitting garments.

Swimsuit Knit – Typically made with a nylon-spandex mixed fiber, the stretch will vary depending on the amount of spandex integrated with the nylon. This fabric has more stretch on the *lengthwise* grain, so be mindful of that when constructing a swim garment – whether it is a one piece or two piece. And depending on the size of the person wearing the garment, you might also consider the nylon-spandex proportions, in case you need extra give in all directions.

Action Knit – These knits are the beefier cotton Lycra knit cousin. They provide more give (up to 100%) because they are typically used in sports apparel garments. Think biker shorts, running pants, sports bras and workout tops and you will easily see where action knits can be utilized. Action knits are always blended fabrics that can be made with nylon, cotton, polyester, plus spandex or latex added for the flexibility. Brands such as Nike®, Adidas®, Reebok® and Under Armor® have all developed their own versions of an action knit.

With all the varieties of knit fabric available, it can easily be that the options are now more daunting than the sewing construction. Knit fabrics are available for sale online and in retail stores in everyday styles, as well as vintage, unique, Japanese, prints and baby fabric styles from a variety of designer fabric makers.