

Fabric softener – do we really need it?

Do I need one?

No. In fact we advise against it.

Fabric softeners are largely unnecessary, expensive and have a number of downsides:

- As far as we're aware, all fabric softeners **reduce the fire retardancy of clothing** (look at the label and you'll see a warning not to use them on children's sleepwear for this reason, despite smiling babies featuring prominently on packaging).
- They **reduce moisture absorbency** (bad news for your towels).
- Because they're not detergents, fabric softeners **don't make your clothes cleaner** – and in a literal sense, they actually make them dirty again since they leave them coated in chemicals.

There are better, cheaper ways to get soft and fluffy towels, such as popping them in the dryer for a few minutes, or just giving them a good shake out.

What's in them?

Typically fabric softener contains three main ingredients – a conditioning agent, an emulsifier and cosmetic elements (colouring and fragrance) – as well as various stabilisers and preservatives to extend shelf life.

These are silicone or ammonia-based fatty, lubricating compounds which leave an oily coating on your clothes, making them feel softer and seem easier to iron. Conditioning agents are also slightly positively charged, which can help to reduce static cling from negatively charged fibres in fabric. It's also what reduces the water absorbency of your towels, and the fire retardant properties of your children's sleepwear.

Because oil and water don't mix, fabric softeners need an emulsifying agent to disperse the fatty, oily conditioning agent through the rinse water so that it can actually get onto your clothes instead of just floating on the top. Without emulsifiers, fabric softener would just disappear down the drain.

Fabric softeners contain chemical fragrances (and colourings). The exact chemical make-up of these fragrances is a closely guarded secret, so you've really got no way of knowing what you'll be wearing against your skin.

Are fabric softeners bad for the environment?

It's never a good idea to add any chemical to our waterways or the environment, and fabric softeners contain a variety of silicones and petrochemical ingredients that may be harmful to marine life.

Some fabric softeners may claim to be readily biodegradable but they're still going to be a big negative for the environment, which seems a pity given their use is completely unnecessary.

While there are fabric softener brands that claim to be better for the environment than others, if you're concerned about the impact of fabric softeners, the best thing is to not use them – your clothes will be just as clean – cleaner even, and you'll save a bit of money.