



HANDY GUIDE TO BUYING A SEWING MACHINE

With hundreds of different models and features to choose from, buying a sewing machine can be confusing – particularly if you're new to sewing or buying for someone else. Use this handy guide to help you understand what to look for in a machine, the best place to buy it and where you can go for more advice.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MACHINE FOR YOU



The first thing to consider when buying a sewing machine is the **type of sewing you do** (or want to do) with your machine and **how often you are likely to use it**. If you are just starting out, or only want to use your machine now and then for mending, alterations and simple projects, a basic mechanical model may be all you need. Just be sure to choose a machine with a 'free arm' which makes it easier to sew sleeves, pockets and trouser legs.

If you are likely to use lots of thick, heavy fabrics or to sew upholstery, you need to look for a sturdy machine that is capable of feeding through these fabrics, without them getting stuck. Thicker fabrics such as fleece and denim also require a longer stitch length than thinner fabrics, so make sure the machine you are interested in has a choice of long and short stitches.

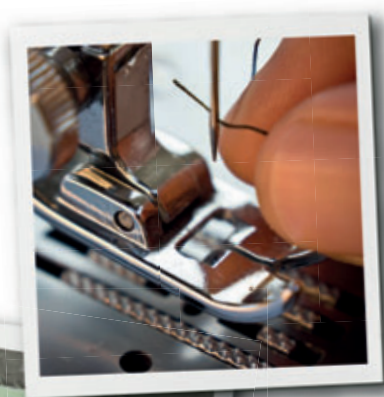
On the other hand, if you sew delicate fabrics, choose a machine that enables you to minimise the pressure on your presser foot, to reduce the risk of snagging your fabric on the feed dogs. And make sure you can buy a fine needle to go with your particular brand of machine.

If you intend sewing intricate projects, including crafts and quilts, you'll appreciate a machine with additional functionality and a wider range of stitches (some offer more than 100). A computerised model gives you more flexibility to be creative and takes the guesswork out of selecting the right stitch length, tension and width for the majority of stitches. It also includes lots of useful features to simplify your sewing. Some brands offer a stitch regulator to help you with freehand quilting.

If you like the idea of doing machine embroidery, there are various options to consider. Some machines are stand alone (just attach the embroidery module and away you go), others need to be run by a computer and there are also dedicated embroidery machines that only do embroidery. Look for on screen editing, a clear and easy to navigate touch screen, good lighting, software and USB capability, plus a choice of hoops. Some machines have no restrictions on hoop size. Most importantly you should find out if you get free lessons on your machine (not just a demonstration) and if there are ongoing embroidery classes for you to attend.



IMPORTANT FEATURES YOU NEED TO CONSIDER



Before you choose your machine, be sure to think about the following:

IS THE MACHINE EASY TO THREAD? The best machines have easy-to-follow, clearly marked, slotted thread guides that allow threading using just one hand. Some even have an automatic threading feature.

DOES THE MACHINE HAVE THE NUMBER AND VARIETY OF STITCHES YOU NEED FOR YOUR TYPE OF SEWING? Even a basic model should include several different lengths of straight stitch, a choice of zigzag stitches and an automatic buttonhole. It's important to think about the projects you might like to tackle in the future, not just what you are sewing now.

ARE THE STITCHES WELL FORMED? The stitches should lie flat and the patterns should be smooth. During reverse stitching the needle should penetrate the same holes formed by the forward motion of the stitch.

DOES THE MACHINE SEW BEAUTIFUL BUTTONHOLES? The satin stitched beads along both sides of the buttonhole should lie flat and be even, with the stitching securely anchored at the ends.

WHAT ACCESSORIES AND FEET COME WITH THE MACHINE? As a minimum you will generally want a buttonhole foot, zipper foot and blind hem foot, extra bobbins, needles, spool caps and a seam guide. A cover or case is also essential to protect your machine from dust and damage.

WHAT ADDITIONAL FEET AND ACCESSORIES ARE AVAILABLE?

If you want to expand your capabilities and try new things, it's worth choosing a brand of machine that enables you to add more accessories in the future e.g. for topstitching, edge stitching, gathering, quilting, attaching piping, patchwork and embellishing.

HOW HEAVY OR PORTABLE IS THE MACHINE?

If you are going to pack your machine away after each use, or transport it around, you need to consider its weight. You won't want to be lifting a heavy machine more often than is necessary. But don't go for something too light if you plan to sew heavier fabrics.

ARE YOU BUYING AN ESTABLISHED BRAND?

When you buy an established brand you can expect a higher level of performance, longer warranty, backup parts and service. You are more likely to get a longer life from your machine and to avoid the frustration and disappointment of a machine that breaks down and/or under performs.

HOW LONG IS THE WARRANTY PERIOD?

The warranty period on sewing machines varies from manufacturer to manufacturer and can be anything from 6 months on the cheaper 'no-name' models to 10 years on the well established brands. A long warranty period is a good indicator of machine quality and the confidence that the manufacturer has in the reliability of their product.

HOW GOOD ARE THE INSTRUCTION MANUALS AND VIDEOS?

Check to see that your instruction manual is clearly written and easy to understand. Can you find the information you need? Some of the established brands have excellent websites with instructional videos to help you get the most out of your machine and the accessories that go with it.



WHERE TO BUY YOUR SEWING MACHINE



A SPECIALIST SEWING STORE

Definitely the best place to buy your machine if you have limited sewing experience and/or you want to **get advice from people who know a lot about sewing**. The staff in these stores generally have a keen interest in sewing, so they understand the various features of each machine and how to use them. They can give you advice on which machines will suit your type of sewing and budget.

You also get to **try before you buy**. Specialist sewing stores have demonstration machines set up so they can show you the features of each machine and you can sew on them yourself to see how they feel. You can even take in your own fabric sample, sew a buttonhole or try stitching a bulky seam.

Many of the local sewing stores offer **sewing lessons or classes** where you can learn more about what your machine can do and the things you can create with it. These are particularly valuable if you're just learning to sew or you have an advanced machine with many features. Check to see if these lessons are available and if they're included in the cost of your machine.

Parts, service and repairs is another area where the specialist sewing store generally wins over other sales outlets. Because they tend to sell established brands, they have direct support from the sewing machine manufacturer as well as easy access to spare parts. Often they do repairs on site. It's still a good idea to check this when you buy though, to make sure you have backup for the expected life of your machine.

A dedicated sewing centre is usually in touch with people in the local sewing community and can connect you with them to share your interest. They are also just a phone call or visit away for helpful sewing advice, support and information.

APPLIANCE AND FURNITURE CHAIN STORES

Buying your sewing machine through one of the large appliance or furniture chain stores is like purchasing any other electrical item out of the box. You probably won't be able to try out the machine and although the sales staff may know what features the machine has, they are unlikely to be knowledgeable on sewing or qualified to give you the best advice. You may also need to find somewhere else to take your machine for servicing and repairs, accessories and parts.

SUPERMARKETS AND DISCOUNT STORES

It's possible to pick up some **very** cheap sewing machines from supermarkets and discount stores, but while the price may be tempting, once you get one of these machines home, you may well be left wishing you had gone for an established brand.

Some of the limitations of the 'no-name' variety include: poor quality of stitching, inability to handle thick fabrics (an important requirement even if you're taking up hems, as you need to be able to sew through a number of fabric layers), poor instruction manuals, narrow range of features, limited or no accessories, short warranty period, no backup parts or service. Essentially they become throw away items once something goes wrong. A classic case of 'you get what you pay for'.

INTERNET

Buying through the internet is fine if you know exactly what you're looking for and want the convenience of shopping online. Most often the price is the same as you will pay in store, although you'll probably have to pay for delivery. Depending who you buy from will determine the level of backup you get, which is usually minimal. You will also need to check details of your warranty to see exactly who it is with. If you buy online from a specialist sewing centre however you can count on the same level of support as if you'd purchased in store and can always contact them for advice before you click the 'Buy Now' button.

BUYING CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to compare key features of the machines you are interested in:

Feature	Machine 1	Machine 2	Machine 3
Brand / Model			
Mechanical or computerised			
Easy to thread			
Good selection of basic stitches and stitch lengths			
Good quality of stitching			
Can handle thick / thin fabrics			
Good quality automatic buttonhole			
Has a free arm			
Comes with the basic accessories - buttonhole foot, zipper foot, blind hem foot, extra bobbins, needles, spool cap, seam guide, cover or case			
Can buy more feet and accessories			
User friendly embroidery			
Machine weight			
Warranty period			
Good quality instruction manuals and videos			
Spare parts are available			
Service and repairs are available			
Demonstration machines set up to try			
Sewing lessons / classes provided			
Sewing advice and information available			
Price			
Special offer			
Additional features			

Enjoy your new machine!

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