

CHOOSING AND CARING FOR LINENS

Michigan massage therapist Patrice Wisner thought she'd figured out her linen laundry dilemma when her husband started washing smaller loads and using more detergent. The result was cleaner sheets, fewer impossible-to-get-out oil stains, and no more lingering smell of oil.

Then, some of her clients started sneezing when they got on her table.

"Too much detergent?" she wonders. "Currently, we use detergent and bleach, but we're on a septic system and I can't say that it's all that great for my septic system to use so much bleach to get these sheets clean. But if I don't, they start to smell when they come out of the dryer, and at some point later on they start to smell like French fries! There's just got to be an answer."

Table linens are one of the most important accessories massage therapists will purchase, since those linens are so visible to clients. And caring properly for the linens is one of the most important steps in maintaining a hygienic practice.

The experts all agree: don't short sheet your massage practice by choosing anything less than the best-quality linens you can afford and keep them in tip-top shape. Here are some pointers for selecting the right linens for your practice, and how to care for them so they always send a positive message to clients.

1. PURE OR BLENDED

Some people avoid 100 percent cotton sheets, preferring the wrinkle-resistance and greater durability that comes from cotton/polyester blends. But there's much to be said for the comfort and soft feel of 100 percent cotton. They also tend to release oil more readily than blends. Likewise, those who appreciate earth-friendly sheets may even look into hemp sheets—more expensive initially, but extremely long lasting—or certified-organic cotton sheets. Remember that you get what you pay for in most instances and quality sheets will not pill as easily as cheaper ones. There's no one best answer. It's just a matter of personal preference.

2. FLANNEL'S APPEAL

"It's the most comfortable sheet there is," says Steve Gern, owner of Sew & Sew, a maker of massage sheets in Glide, Oregon. And while the quality of other kinds of sheets is measured in thread count—the higher the better, as a rule—that's not true with flannel sheets. Flannel is measured in weight. Sew & Sew, for instance, carries 3.8-ounce and 5-ounce flannel sheets, with the heavier-weight flannel costing a bit more. The heavier the

weight, the more plush the feel and the more washings it can endure. And while flannel is mostly associated with chilly climates, it's actually a good product for warm weather, too, since it wicks away perspiration more readily than other materials.

3. YOUR LINEN CLOSET

John Sise, owner of Innerpeace, a Walpole, New Hampshire, massage linen company, suggests keeping a minimum of two days worth of linens. So, if you're going to do five massages a day, you need to have at least 10 sets of standard-width (46-inch) sheets on hand. "We recognize that some people may need a wider top sheet, so we recommend that the therapist has a few wide top flat sheets to accommodate the people who may have extra modesty issues or are larger than the average client," Sise says. It's also a good idea to keep plenty of hand towels nearby. "They're really good for wiping a client off, so you don't have to use a sheet or a drape to wipe them off," says Diana Dapkins, president of Pure Pro Massage Products, of Greenfield, Massachusetts. "And if you spill a product, they're just a nice tool to have around."



4. SOLIDS VERSUS PRINTS

Again, this is a matter of personal preference. There are lots of beautiful prints on the market, including batiks and themed designs, but Gern says he sold so few printed sheets he stopped carrying them. Solids—especially whites—look clean and hygienic, but prints carry one big advantage over solids: they can help camouflage stains.

5. SANITATION RULES

Of course, don't reuse any towel or sheet that has come in contact with a client before laundering it. Sheets should be changed after every client. Same for face-rest covers. Find a hamper for dirty linens that is well away from the clean ones. Make sure

to sterilize all table surfaces between clients. Select quality, ecofriendly cleaning products that are considerate of clients' allergies and void of artificial scents. And, of course, thoroughly wash your hands between clients.


6. LAUNDRY TIPS

Experts disagree about the ideal temperature at which to launder your linens. Norma Keyes, director of product standards for Cotton Inc., a trade group to promote cotton products, advises using the hottest water possible to remove stains and odor. Gern and Sise say hot water only sets in stains. They recommend warm water. Dapkins insists warm to lukewarm is fine, and that even washing in cold water is acceptable. But here's something they all agree on: get them washed as soon as possible—within 24 hours of use. "If you must wait to wash them, store them in black plastic bags," Dapkins says. "Tie the bags shut to keep out air and light, as these are the two things that turn oil rancid."

For badly stained linens, allow them to soak in a degreaser, then launder them twice to completely remove oily residue. For stubborn stains, add bleach to the second wash so the bleach can penetrate after some of the oily buildup is gone, Dapkins suggests.

7. SPECIAL SUPPLIES

Unlike bed linens, which are only for sleeping, massage table linens get regularly doused with oil. Simply tossing them into the wash with other linens won't be adequate. Some sort of degreaser must be used, experts say. One possibility is dish soap, which won't harm linens, or the spray product called Zout. Dapkins created Pure Pro Linen Degreaser, a citrus-based product, specifically with the demands



of massage therapists in mind. “I got tired of hearing massage therapists talk about stained linens,” she says. “It’s a citrus-based solvent, which is very different from other products on the market that are petroleum-based. Anyone will tell you that vegetable oil is tough. It doesn’t mix with water and it doesn’t come out very easily. The citrus solvents are just phenomenal at eating vegetable oil.” She says degreasers do not remove stains. That’s what bleach is for. But before the bleach can work, massage linens may require an initial washing with a degreaser.

8. DRYER SAFETY

If a sheet comes out of the washer still smelling of oil, do not put it in the dryer. Drying it will only worsen the problem, because it will bake in the oil residue, making removal even harder. What’s more, there’s a safety issue involved. “We’ve had a number of people with dryer fires, because they put the stuff in the dryer and it combusted. There was simply too much residue on the linens,” Dapkins says.

9. FOLDING TECHNIQUE

Yes, there really is a secret to folding a fitted sheet, and if you master it, your linen cabinets will be forever neater. Start by pulling the sheet out of the dryer immediately, not letting it sit around unfolded for hours. You’ll need to spread the sheet out on a table or bed. Fold it in half horizontally, then tuck the top gathered end into the pocket formed by the bottom gathered end. Fold everything horizontally in half again. Then fold the bulky gathered ends horizontally into the middle of the

sheet. Fold the smooth end over the top of the bulky end, then fold lengthwise into thirds yet again. If you’re having trouble picturing this, a number of online reference sites have step-by-step picture guides. Just type “fold a fitted sheet” into your Web browser, and you’ll find lots of online help.

10. LETTING GO

Finally, if you see any sign of holes, broken elastic, fraying, or anything that looks unserviceable, it’s time to find a different use for that sheet than putting it under a massage client. And if you’ve tried every trick you know and you still can’t get a stain out, surrender to the inevitable and ditch the sheet. “If you get a year’s worth of service out of a sheet, and you do 25 clients a week, remember that’s just pennies per use. You’ve gotten your money out of that sheet,” Dapkins says. **m&b**

6 *Rebecca Jones is a Denver-based freelancer who has a new appreciation for the intricacies of massage linens. Contact her at killarneyrose@comcast.net.*