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I've been using dryer sheets to add fragrance, reduce static cling, and soften clothes for as long as I can remember. They work, they're cheap, and I've never thought twice about replacing them with another product. Most recently, I've been reading and hearing a lot about dryer balls. They are marketed as the chemical-free alternative to dryer sheets that not only soften clothes and reduce static, but they also do something that dryer sheets cannot, reduce drying time. In this article, I provide an in-depth comparison of dryer balls vs. dryer sheets. You'll learn the similarities, differences, pros, and cons of each. I also reveal the results of the test I conducted to see if dryer balls do what their makers claim. By the end, you'll have all the information you need to decide which product is best for you. Let's dive right into it! **Key Differences Between Dryer Balls and Dryer Sheets** Dryer sheets reduce static cling by releasing positively charged particles onto clothes neutralizing the imbalance of electrons that occurs when clothing items rub against each other.The science behind dryer balls as an effective solution for static cling is not as clear. Based on several thousands of customer reports, dryer balls won't eliminate static cling, but they can reduce it by maintaining separation between items of clothing as they tumble. Also, it's been reported that if you wet wool dryer balls before using them, they will increase humidity levels during the drying cycle, which helps reduce static cling.Dryer sheets soften clothes by coating them with a fatty molecule that gives fabrics a softer and more pleasant feel. Dryer balls soften clothes by agitating the fibers, although there's debate about whether they actually make clothes feel softer. Dryer sheets often contain chemicals to add fragrance. These chemicals are rumored to be toxic and linked to several illnesses after long-term exposure, but this claim has only been proven in small studies. Dryer balls on their own don't add any fragrance, but you can add a few drops of lavender essential oil to wool dryer balls to add a pleasant scent without harmful chemicals. Dryer balls reduce drying time by creating separation between clothing items and allowing the hot air to circulate more easily. Dryer sheets do not have any impact on drying time. How Dryer Sheets Work Dryer sheets have three purposes, soften clothes, reduce static cling, and add a fresh fragrance to each load. These small rectangular sheets are made of polyester and are coated with specially formulated chemicals and compounds. The chemicals and compounds become activated by the hot air and friction with the laundry. Once activated, they release those chemicals onto the clothes to start working their magic. So how do dryer sheets actually work? Soften Clothes The key ingredient in dryer sheets is a surfactant, a term that comes from combining surface active and agents. Surfactants are compounds that lower the surface tension between two liquids, a liquid and a gas, or a liquid and a solid. In the case of dryer sheets, the surfactant contains both a fatty molecule, such as a quaternary ammonium salt or silicone oil, and ions, which are positively charged particles. When you turn on your dryer, the fatty molecule (which may differ by brand) activates and proceeds to coat your clothes throughout the dry cycle. As it coats your clothes, it adds a smooth and soft feeling to the touch. Static Cling Have you ever lost a sock in the dryer only to find it stuck to a sweater that ran in the same load? If so, then you've experienced static cling. To understand how dryer sheets eliminate static cling, you first need to understand how static cling happens in the first place. According to ScienceNetLinks.com, when clothing rubs together in the dryer, electrons move from one item to another, causing some atoms to become positively charged while others become negatively charged. When this happens, clothes stick together because opposite charges attract in order to stabilize. Dryer sheets eliminate static cling by releasing the ions that are stored in the surfactant. Those ions, or positive charges particles, equalize the imbalance of electrons and prevent clothes from sticking together. Fragrance Most dryer sheets are scented with wonderful fragrances that make your clothes smell nice and fresh. Sounds wonderful, right? Not so much. There have been articles written and a handful of reports claiming that the chemicals added to dryer sheets for fragrance, like benzyl acetate and ethyl acetate, are extremely hazardous to your health have been linked to contact dermatitis, asthma, and migraines. There are also articles refuting this claim and calling it fake news. Whether it's true or not, it's out there, and you should be aware of the risk. Pros of Dryer Sheets Dryer sheets effectively soften clothes, reduce static cling, and add fragrance.Dryer sheets are easy to use. All you have to do is place one into the dryer before you start the cycle. Dryer sheets are very affordable. You can usually find a box of 240 dryer sheets for under \$10, which is less than 4 cents a sheet. You can check the current prices on Amazon here. Cons of Dryer Sheets There are claims that dryer sheets contain toxic chemicals that can irritate your skin and cause other serious illnesses after continuous exposure. Unlike dryer balls, which you can reuse, you can only use dryer sheets once so over time, they cost more.Unlike dryer balls, dryer sheets do not reduce drying time. There are claims that the fatty molecules dryer sheets release make towels less absorbent. How Dryer Balls Work Dryer balls are typically made out of plastic or wool and, unlike dryer sheets, do not contain any added compounds or ions. They are marketed as a chemical-free alternative to liquid fabric softener and dryer sheets and have three purposes; reduce drying time, limit static cling, and soften clothes. Reduce Drying Time Dryer machines work by tumbling clothes to create separation between items so that hot air can circulate and dry the clothes. Without that separation between clothing items, you would have a damp pile sitting in a hot chamber, which would take a much longer time to dry. Dryer balls reduce drying time by enhancing the effect of tumbling that dryers already create. As they bounce around in the dryer's chamber, they work their way between items creating even more separation allowing air to circulate easier and dry clothes faster. Static Cling Although dryer balls do not eliminate static cling by releasing positive ions like dryer sheets, they are known to reduce the amount of static. They do this in two ways. First, they create separation between clothing items, so there is less overall friction and fewer opportunities to create static. Second, wool dryer balls absorb and hold onto moisture during the cycle. That moisture helps elevate humidity, which limits the chances of static. To enhance this effect, spray wool dryer balls with water before starting the cycle. Since wool is denser than most materials, it will hold onto that moisture and keep humidity levels higher while everything else dries completely. Soften Clothes Dryer balls are also known to soften clothes. They don't smear a fatty molecule all over the clothes to make this happen. They agitate the fibers and "fluff" as they tumble along with the load. Do Dryer Balls Work? Results of My Test Being the skeptic that I am, I decided to put dryer balls to the test. My goal was to determine if they reduce drying time, static cling, and soften clothes. I tried my best to make the test as scientific as possible. Over eight weeks, I ran 10 loads; 5 with dryer balls and 5 without dryer balls. I used the same clothes in each load and set the washer and dryer to the same settings. A couple of caveats; first, I used plastic dryer balls, so my test didn't account for the moisture retention of wool, and second, I only used two dryer balls (some recommend using up to 6). Long story short, I found that dryer balls reduced drying time by an average of 5 minutes (13%), and they had no significant impact on static cling or softness. In fairness, static cling and softness are two difficult categories to quantify with only 10 loads, so more data is needed to determine if they work definitely. You can check out the full results of my test in my recent article, Do Dryer Balls Work?. Pros of Dryer Balls Dryer balls effectively reduce the time it takes for clothes to dry, which can save you hundreds in gas and electricity over time. Dryer sheets have no impact on drying time.Dryer balls, unlike dryer sheets, are reusable, which not only helps the environment but also saves you money.Whether the health-related dangers of dryer sheets are real or not, dryer balls present no health risks because they do not release any potentially harmful substances. Dryer balls fluff clothes as they dry, which contributes to reducing static, softening clothes, and reducing wrinkles. Similar to dryer sheets, dryer balls are very inexpensive. Check out the current prices on Amazon. Besides all the core benefits they provide, dryer balls also make a great dog toy. Cons of Dryer Balls Dryer balls can be noisy as they bounce off the walls of the dryer chamber.Dryer balls are not as effective as dryer sheets at eliminating static and softening clothes. Without added essential oils, dryer balls do not add any fragrance to the laundry.Some customers complain that wool dryer balls can unravel in the dryer, which can cause an annoying mess. Which Dryer Sheets are the Best? All the major laundry brands like Gain, Snuggle, and Bounce make dryer sheets. You can buy them at any supermarket, warehouse club, or on Amazon. They may have slight variations in their chemical make-up, but the differences between dryer sheet brands are minimal. The primary differentiator between each option is fragrance. If you decide to go with dryer sheets, I'd recommend testing out a couple of brands to see if you like the scent before you buy in bulk. If you are hesitant to go with dryer sheets because of the potentially harmful chemicals, you can purchase fragrance-free dryer sheets like these (link to view Amazon). Which Dryer Balls are the Best? Dryer balls come in two varieties, plastic and wool. Both types of dryer balls are hypoallergenic, non-toxic, and safe for all kinds of clothing materials. They work the same way, but there are subtle differences worth mentioning. Plastic dryer balls usually have spikes like this: These spikes help by catching the folds of clothing and allowing the balls to create space. The ones I used are made by Whitmor and have over a thousand, mostly excellent reviews on Amazon. Some people swear by wool dryer balls, and I understand why. They are chemical-free, all-natural, and are heavier than plastic ones, which makes it easy for them to plow through clothing and create separation for air to flow. They have two main advantages over plastic dryer balls. First, they absorb moisture, which elevates the humidity levels in the dryer and prevents static. Second, you can spray them with essential oils to add a fragrance to your clothes without harsh chemicals. If you're looking for social proof, these wool dryer balls made by Smart Sheep have thousands of great reviews on Amazon. If you're on the fence about dryer sheets and dryer balls, your first step is to prioritize your goals. If eliminating static cling is your primary goal, dryer sheets accomplish that the best. If you are more concerned with avoiding the risks of exposure to chemicals (even though the proof that dryer studs are harmful is anecdotal), dryer balls are the way to go. If you enjoy the fresh scent of laundry when a subtle fragrance is added, dryer sheets have that. If reducing drying time is your main objective, dryer balls are the product for you. Personally, if I have the option to avoid a potentially harmful substance, I will. Even though a full-scale study has not proved the claims, the anecdotal evidence is enough for me to ditch dryer sheets. Also, reducing drying time is a huge benefit that you don't get with dryer sheets. Which Do You Prefer? Do you have a strong preference for dryer sheets or dryer balls? Do you believe the claims about dryer sheets being toxic? Have you ever tried using both? Let us know in the comments below! If you found this article helpful, you should also check out:

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