



Lightweight Knits

Learn the secrets of creating
feather-light garments

BY CONNIE CRAWFORD

If you want to make comfortable, attractive garments with a carefree aesthetic, then lightweight knits are the ideal fabric choice. Their characteristic weightlessness, stretch, drape, lack of bulk—and the ease with which they can be sewn—make these modern fabrics highly wearable. They can be used to create a wide variety of styles, from sporty to feminine and whimsical to sophisticated. Many lightweight knits are perfect for sewing clothes to wear in summer weather and warm locales, but they also make excellent year-round layering pieces for everyday wear or travel wardrobes.

The array of lightweight knits on the market is mind-boggling, and selecting the right type for a particular project can seem tricky. Your choice depends on the garment design and the fabric characteristics needed. But never fear—this article will help you make the best pairing of lightweight knit and design.

CHOOSE COMPLEMENTARY GARMENT DESIGNS

Designers often use light and airy knit fabrics for simple, casual-chic garments, but they work equally well for more complex cuts, such as draped and twisted designs. All lightweight knits have a soft hand and supple drape, and they lend themselves well to easy-fitting garments that either hug or skim the figure or envelop it in voluminous folds.

Cardigans, T-shirts, and tanks, as well as relaxed skirts,

This gossamer jacquard knit has a lacelike texture and soft hand that are perfect qualities for a drapey cardigan.

Pattern: Butterick 5793. Fabric: Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft.

dresses, pants, and loungewear are all great choices. Don't limit these fabrics only to casual garments, however. They are a great choice for more dramatic designs—especially styles that incorporate draping, ruching, twisted details, multiple layers, asymmetrical elements, cowl necklines, cascades of ruffles or flounces, or bias cuts.

Lightweight fabrics cling to and highlight figure irregularities, so in close-fitting designs (with minimal or negative ease) look for interesting cuts, seaming, or surface textures or embellishments for visual interest. With less-fitted garments (with 2 inches to 4 inches of design ease, or greater for more voluminous garments) the sky is the limit, design-wise.

If you plan to wear the garment in hot weather, look for a knit made from natural fibers, such as cotton, linen, rayon, or silk. Just as with woven fabrics, many of these fibers help you keep cool because they don't trap and reflect body heat. Worn in high temperatures, even the lightest, sheerest knit can be uncomfortably warm if it's made from synthetic fibers.

Because lightweight knit fabrics tend to drape in soft, smooth, vertical folds, you can use them to make garments that visually elongate your figure. Thin, supple fabrics eliminate bulk, so that even voluminous designs visually slim the silhouette, despite being oversized. You can use these fabrics to camouflage figure irregularities or emphasize your shape in the same ways you would use a woven fabric. Draping, folds, and shirring in strategic areas create fullness to disguise or enhance your figure. Printed knits in loose-fitting designs de-emphasize your form and make the fabric's graphic element the focus. A fluid, soft fabric with a shiny surface in a fitted silhouette captures light and is, therefore, an excellent choice to play up curves.

Take the time to consider whether your chosen garment design and your fabric selections are complementary. Keep in mind that you don't need to restrict your pattern choices to those designed only for knits; many patterns designed for wovens also can be made with knits. If you choose a stretchy lightweight knit for a woven pattern, use $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-wide seam allowances to make up for excess ease added by the fabric's stretch, and stabilize shoulder seams with twill tape. Avoid using lightweight knits to make tailored garments; they simply can't give the support necessary. Also remember to make mock-up garments to get the fit right.

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Lightweight jersey knits are extremely versatile; they are an excellent choice for comfortable, easy-wearing dresses.

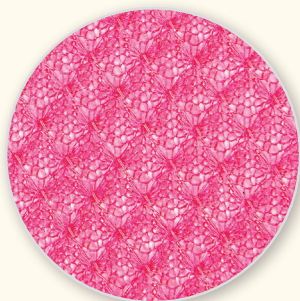
Pattern: Butterick 5778. Fabrics: Cotton/polyester-blend diamond-print jersey and solid rayon-blend jersey, Fabric.com.



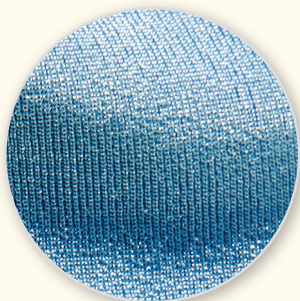
Common lightweight knits

Some of the most readily available lightweight knit fabrics are knitted from silk, wool, cotton, rayon, nylon, or polyester, many blended with spandex, to produce a wide variety of fabric types. Many of them are sold under different names that have nothing to do with their knit type. The chart below identifies several of the most common lightweight knit fabric types available, along with their characteristics and typical fiber contents.

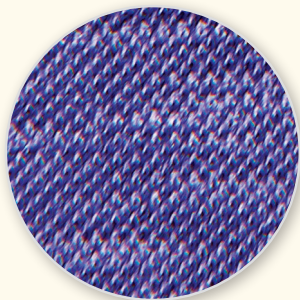
Knit Type	Fiber Content	Characteristics	Garment Design Suitability
ACTIVEWEAR	<i>Rayon, cotton, nylon, polyester, or metallic yarns blended with spandex</i>	It molds to the wearer's body, has a supple drape, and is extremely elastic with substantial stretch along the straight grain and cross-grain and excellent recovery.	Activewear/sports clothing, outdoor clothing, dancewear, casual jackets, bathing suits
DOUBLE	<i>Polyester, cotton, wool, silk, rayon, or spandex blends</i>	Firm, flat, and stable. Commonly found in medium to heavy weights, it also comes in light weights. It typically has fine ribs and usually looks the same on both sides, but can have other textures. It falls into moderately soft flares and retains its shape. Wool knits are especially stretchy and have good drape.	T-shirts and other casual or trendy tops, easy-fit dresses, cardigans, wraps
INTERLOCK	<i>Nylon, silk, polyester, or cotton</i>	Flat and smooth surface, with the same appearance on the right and wrong sides. It can accommodate fullness if it is gathered or used with elasticized shirring. Its fullness retains a soft, graceful drape.	Casual tops, elastic-waist pants, elastic-waist skirts, casual dresses
JACQUARD	<i>Polyester, nylon, silk, or polyester blends</i>	Typically has a figured design on the surface; flows and drapes gracefully.	T-shirts, fitted dresses with few seams, loose-fitting drapery cardigans
JERSEY	<i>Polyester, rayon, cotton, wool, silk, or blends</i>	A type of single knit, jersey falls into moderately soft flares, has good stretch and recovery, and it retains its shape in a garment; usually lightweight, but also available in tissue-weight. ITY (interlock twist yarn) knits are also a type of jersey.	T-shirts, casual dresses
MILANESE	<i>Nylon, silk, or rayon</i>	Traditionally made to mimic tricot; slippery, soft, and does not curl at the edges; may also look like lace or have a cabled surface, depending on how the manufacturer treats the warp knit. It has controlled crosswise stretch but no lengthwise stretch. It accommodates fullness if gathered or used with elasticized shirring. Its fullness retains a soft, graceful drape.	Sweater-look tops, sweater-look dresses, elastic-waist skirts
RASCHEL	<i>Acrylic, wool, cotton, or polyester</i>	Imitates crochet or net fabrics. It is somewhat stiff, falls away from the body, and drapes in wide cones. Its fullness retains a lofty effect and follows the silhouette of the garment.	Loose, swing-type jackets
SINGLE	<i>All fibers, especially acrylic, cotton, silk, or polyester</i>	A flat-surfaced knit with a smooth face and a looped reverse. It falls into soft flares, and its fullness retains a moderately soft drape. Stretches in a crosswise direction and has controlled stretch in the lengthwise direction.	Casual and dressy tops, loose-fitting dresses
SLINKY	<i>Acetate or polyester and spandex blends</i>	Very slippery and stretchy fabric with excellent recovery, often knitted with a fine, ribbed texture.	Loose-fitting pants, cardigans, tops, skirts, and dresses, both casual and dressy
TRICOT	<i>Nylon, cotton, or polyester</i>	Available in sheer to medium weights; falls into soft flares and can accommodate fullness by being gathered or using elasticized shirring or smocking.	Pajamas, nightgowns, and undergarments such as panties, slips, and camisoles; also useful as a lining for knit garments



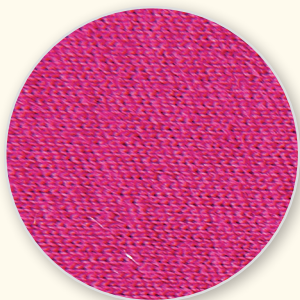
Milanese knit



Slinky knit



Double knit



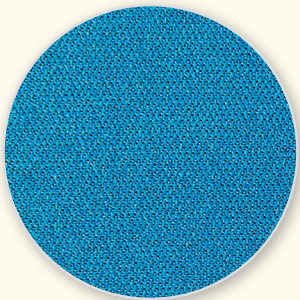
Interlock knit



Jacquard knit



Raschel knit



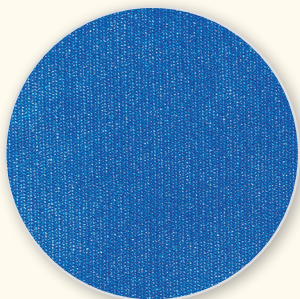
Single knit



Activewear knit



Jersey knit (burnout)



Tricot knit

This lightweight, Tencel-blend piqué double knit is ideal for a fitted silhouette with shirred details. A tricot lining supports the outer shell.

Pattern: Vogue 8787. Fabric: double knit, VogueFabricsStore.com; tricot, Fabric.com.



Evaluate stretch and recovery

Lightweight knit fabrics may have a dense, closed structure, or they may be knitted more loosely with a very open structure. They can be thin, filmy, and sheer or solid and perfectly opaque. Stretch can vary greatly in all cases. The amount and direction of a knit's stretch depends on the knitting process used, the stitch gauge, and the yarn weight (or denier).

DETERMINE STRETCH RATIO AND MATCH IT TO PATTERNS

For a fitted pattern design, you need to compare the fabric's stretch to the pattern pieces. Many stretch patterns provide a gauge, but if the pattern you've selected does not, use this method. Measure the pattern's circumference at bust level (tops or dresses) or hip level (pants and skirts), subtracting seam allowances. Transfer the measurement to the fabric's cross-grain, marking each end with pins.

Then, measure your full bust (or hip for skirts and pants). Draw a line equaling this measurement on a piece of paper, and hold the fabric alongside the line, with one hand at each pin. Gently stretch the fabric along the line until it resists.

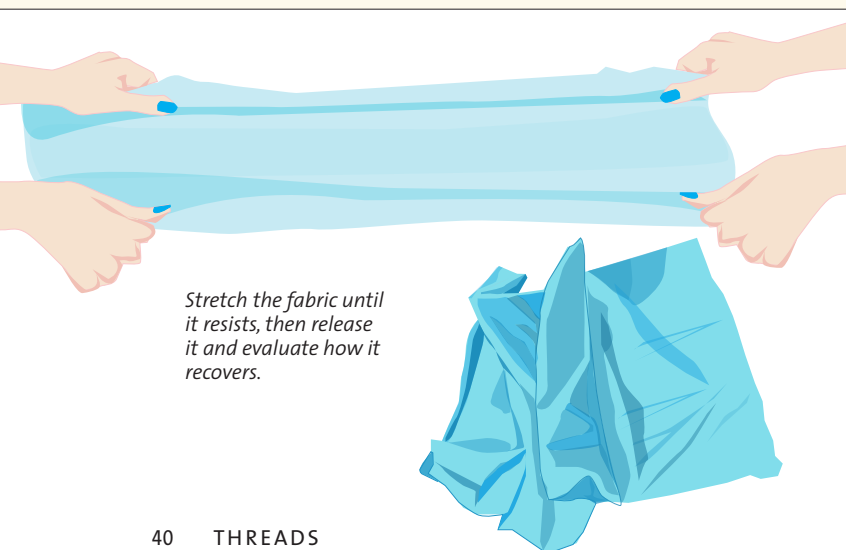
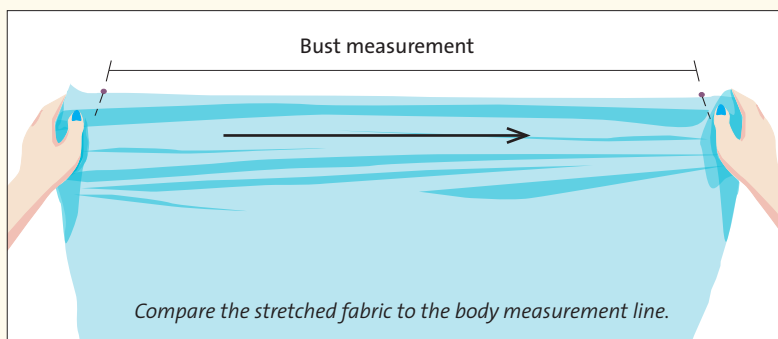
Compare the stretched fabric to the line. Did it stretch to the length of your body measurement? If not, select the next pattern size up. If the fabric stretched more than 3 inches longer than your body measurement, choose the next pattern size down.

DETERMINE THE RECOVERY RATIO

The recovery ratio is the degree to which a knit reverts to its original shape after being stretched. Knits with good recovery return to their original width and length after stretching; they tend to snap back into shape quickly. This means they will hold their shape when worn.

To find the recovery ratio, grasp the fabric with both hands and stretch until it resists. Release the fabric. If it doesn't snap back, sags, or waffles, it does not have good recovery. Test the fabric in both directions. Don't reject knits with poor recovery out of hand, unless your garment or your preference requires good recovery. Knits with poor recovery are useful for loose and flowing garments that don't take a lot of distortion during wear.

As you consider different lightweight knits for a garment, evaluate their stretch and recovery (the fabric's ability to return from a stretched position to its original dimensions), as well as their hand, body, and drape. It's important to find a fabric's stretch ratio in both directions to determine how much ease is necessary. Its recovery determines how well a garment will continue to fit as you wear it.



Good stretch and recovery are necessary for most knit garments to prevent sagging during wear. Very loose-fitting garments, like this cardigan, are the exception.

A polyester/Lycra-blend ITY jersey behaves beautifully in dense ruching, as on this top, as well as in other edgy details, such as draping, asymmetrical cuts, and figure-hugging silhouettes.

*Pattern: Christine Jonson no. 426
Shirred Top. Fabric: ITY jersey,
GorgeousFabrics.com.*



Sewing tips and techniques

Medium- and heavyweight knits are a cinch to sew, but lightweight knits—particularly tissue or sheer knits—can be trickier to handle. The fabric can distort or move during cutting, and the edges may curl. A few special techniques will help you better prepare, cut, and sew lightweight knits.

GET A TRUE CUT

It's crucial to stabilize knit fabrics, especially lighter weights, during cutting. My preferred method is to layer brown kraft paper, shelf paper, butcher paper, or clean newsprint under the fabric and pattern piece, pinning and cutting through all layers. This prevents the fabric from slipping or distorting and helps get a cleaner, more accurate cut.

1 Draw a cross-grain line on the underlayer paper, perpendicular to the paper's edge. Align and pin folded or single-layer fabric yardage to the paper edge and the cross-grain line, keeping the fabric flat and smooth.

2 Pin all the pattern pieces marked "place on fold." Lay out the remaining pieces, aligning the grainlines. Pin through all layers.

3 With sharp scissors or a rotary cutter, cut through all layers. Use long, continuous strokes to prevent jagged edges.

SELECT THE RIGHT THREAD

For very sheer to lightweight knits, use the strongest fine thread available, such as silk, nylon, spun polyester, and polyester-core threads (mercerized cotton with a polyester wrap, in fine or all-purpose weight).

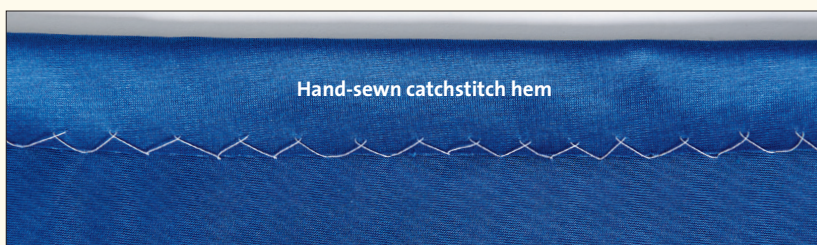
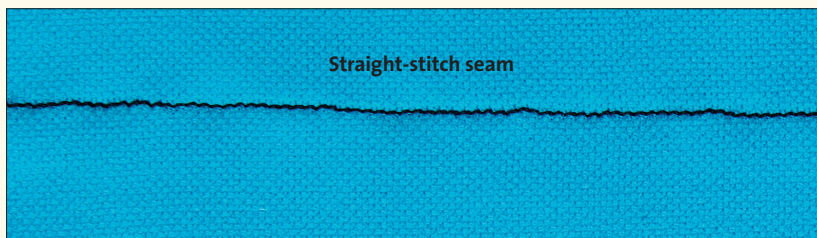
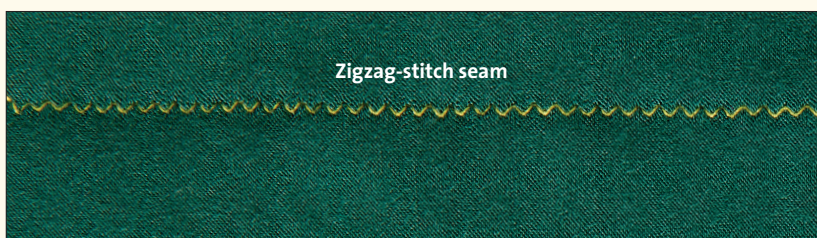
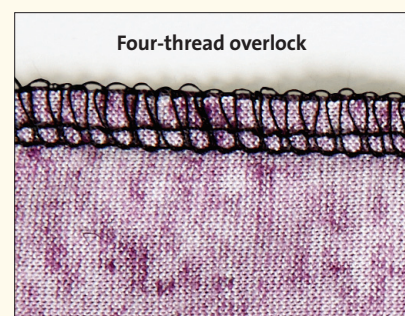
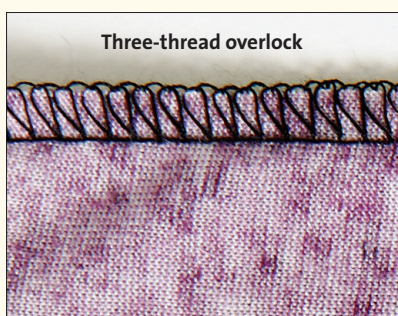
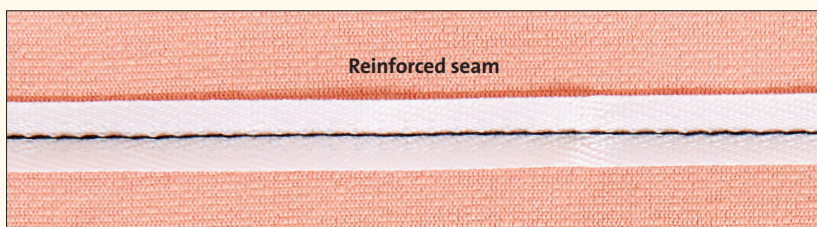
USE THE BEST NEEDLE

Needle selection is especially important when sewing knits. A ballpoint sewing machine needle works for many types of knits because its rounded tip separates, rather than punctures, the fabric's yarns. A stretch needle is best for spandex-blend or very dense knitwear, because it is specifically designed to pierce between yarns. Choose size 70/10 or 75/11 for lightweight knits.

CHOOSE A SEAM STYLE

There are several seam styles ideal for sewing knit garments. I recommend pin-basting all seams before sewing or serging to prevent seam distortion during stitching.

- **Reinforced seam:** Reinforcing seams with tape maintains the seams' shape and controls stretching—important at armholes, shoulders, and necklines. Select seam binding or twill tape to match the fabric color. On the fabric's wrong side, pin the seam binding or twill tape to the pinned garment seamline, and sew the seam through all layers.
- **Serged seams:** Sew and finish lightweight knit seams in one step by serging. Use a three-thread overlock stitch with a balanced tension for seams where moderate strength and stretch are required, such as T-shirts and loose-fitting garments. Use a four- or five-thread overlock stitch for seams that undergo greater stress.
- **Zigzag-stitch seam:** Use a 1.5-mm-wide and at least 1.5-mm-long zigzag stitch. The seam will stretch slightly with the fabric when worn.
- **Straight-stitch seam:** Use a 1.0 mm stitch length, and stretch the fabric in both directions as you sew. You can finish this seam by sewing another line of stitches close to the raw seam allowance edge. The double seam is ideal for sportswear and activewear containing spandex because it strengthens the seam and prevents it from rolling.
- **Hems:** I recommend hand-sewing hems with a catchstitch or machine-sewing a blind hem (see “Teach Yourself to Sew: The blind hem,” page 70). You can also topstitch hems with a straight or zigzag stitch. However, use a straight stitch only when stretch isn't necessary at the hem, such as for full skirts.



Photos: (pp. 36, 37, 40, 41; p. 39, right) Jack Deutsch, stylist; Jessica Saal, hair and makeup; Patricia for Halley Resources; all others, Sloan Howard. Illustrations: Rosann Berry; styling credits: (pp. 36 and 40) earrings—Kate Spade (Bloomington.com), top—(J.Crew.com), pants—(Anthropologie.com); (p. 37) earrings—stylist's own; (p. 39) necklace—(BananaRepublic.com); (p. 41) necklace—Ralph Lauren (Bloomington.com), skirt—(Zara.com).