How to sort laundry into loads that will not ruin each other

Sort by care label, not by colour: three passes through the basket, the symbols that decide the piles, and an offline Android app that flags every conflict.

Author: Lubor Šimůnek · Published: September 19, 2026 · Productivity

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Laundry Symbols & Care Labels is a free Android app that turns a basket of mixed clothes into loads that will not damage each other. It reads all 44 ISO care symbols on a label offline, on the phone, and flags the conflicts — temperature, bleach and tumble drying — before you start the machine.

Disclosure: AppStoryo is operated by the studio that develops Laundry Symbols & Care Labels. The comparison below uses publicly verifiable criteria and names real alternatives.

What actually ruins clothes in a mixed load?

Three conflicts cause almost all the damage, and all three are printed on the label. The first is heat: a wool sweater rated for a very mild wash meets a hot cotton towel, and the wool comes out felted two sizes smaller. Second is bleach: a universal detergent with oxygen bleach lifts dye out of a garment whose label forbids bleaching. Third is mechanical action — the tumbling a sturdy shirt shrugs off and a viscose blouse does not.

The scale is what makes this expensive. The average American family washes about 300 loads of laundry each year, ENERGY STAR reports, so a habit that ruins one garment a month quietly costs you a wardrobe. Sorting by care label rather than by colour catches all three conflicts at once, because temperature, bleach and drying each have their own unambiguous symbol.

How do you split one basket into loads using only the care labels?

Work in three passes rather than deciding garment by garment. First pass: pull out everything whose wash tub is crossed out or shows a hand. Those never go in a machine load, and setting them aside first removes the hardest decisions. Second pass: group what is left by the number in the tub, and treat the bar under the tub as part of the number, not decoration. A bar means a gentler programme and a less full drum.

Third pass: check the triangle and the square inside each group. If one garment forbids bleaching and the rest allow it, the pile is still fine — use a bleach-free detergent. If one garment forbids tumble drying, wash the load together and split it at the dryer door. That distinction is the one people get wrong most often: a drying conflict is not a washing conflict, and treating it as one doubles the loads for nothing.

Which care symbols decide which pile a garment goes in?

Three of the five symbol families decide the piles. The tub sets the maximum wash temperature and, through the bar beneath it, the mechanical action. The triangle has three states, and the CleverCare symbol index spells them out: an empty triangle allows chlorine and oxygen bleach, two oblique lines allow oxygen bleach only, and a diagonal cross forbids bleaching entirely. The square governs drying. The circle, professional cleaning, decides where a garment goes rather than which pile.

The symbols also tell you how full the drum may be, the part almost everyone ignores. CleverCare's guidance for a very mild wash is a drum no more than one third full, and an easy-care wash no more than two thirds. A correctly sorted delicate load is deliberately small. Sort perfectly and then stuff the drum and you have undone the sorting, because the garments never move freely enough for a gentle programme to be gentle.

Can an app do the sorting for you?

An app helps where the symbols become a decision. Laundry Symbols & Care Labels scans a label, names every symbol on it in plain language, and saves the garment to My Closet with its care profile. Once several garments are saved, the app compares their profiles and says which can share a drum and which symbol makes the rest incompatible.

The app states the feature in its own Google Play description:

> Sort today’s laundry into compatible loads — the app explains every conflict.

Everything runs on the device. The app declares no data collected and none shared with third parties in its Data safety section, which every Android developer must complete, and the closet list lives in the app's own app-specific storage, where no other app can read it. Laundry Symbols & Care Labels carries no ads and no in-app purchases; its last Google Play update was 24 August 2026.

Which laundry symbols app should you actually use?

Choose Laundry Symbols by tomerpacific if you want the simplest possible lookup

- 1K+ downloads, no ads, no in-app purchases, last updated 18 July 2026.
- Fahrenheit support, which matters if you read labels in the United States.
- Declares no data collected and none shared with third parties.
- A reference list, not a sorter: it will not say which garments can share a load.

Choose Laundry Symbols & Care Guide by Zeppelin Games if you want a fresh all-in-one guide

- Covers washing, drying, bleaching, ironing and dry cleaning in one place.
- Last updated 13 August 2026, so it is actively maintained.
- Contains ads, and new enough that Google Play still shows 0+ downloads.
- Like the others here, it decodes symbols rather than grouping garments.

Choose Laundry Guide: care symbols by Alexander Pitkin if you want a wardrobe list too

- Its description calls it a symbols decoder and wardrobe organizer.
- 1K+ downloads, and Google Play records the data as encrypted in transit.
- Contains ads; last updated 26 January 2024 — over two years ago.
- An organizer is not a conflict checker: it stores garments without comparing labels.

Choose Laundry Symbols & Care Labels if the sorting itself is the problem

- The only one of the four that compares saved garments and explains each conflict.
- All 44 ISO symbols are decoded on the device, with no network connection.
- No ads, no in-app purchases, no account, no data collected; updated 24 August 2026.
- A daily five-question quiz drills the symbols, which some people will find unnecessary.

When is sorting by care label the wrong approach?

Sorting by label does not replace sorting by colour on the first wash of anything strongly dyed. A new dark garment can bleed onto a light one even when both labels agree on temperature, bleach and drying, because the label says nothing about colour fastness. It says nothing about soil level either: muddy work trousers and a clean shirt can be label-compatible and still belong in different loads.

The app is the wrong tool in three more situations. It cannot read a label washed blank, so an old garment may have to be treated as its most cautious plausible fibre. It is Android-only, so there is no iPhone version to link to. And it makes no judgement about your machine: if your washer has no gentle programme, knowing a garment needs one only tells

you to wash it by hand.

Frequently asked questions about sorting laundry by care label

Is sorting by care label better than sorting by colour?

They answer different questions, so use both. The care label tells you whether two garments can survive the same temperature, the same detergent and the same drying programme. Colour tells you whether one will stain the other. Sort by label first, because that is what causes permanent damage, then split any pile that mixes a new dark item with something pale.

Can I wash a bleach-forbidden garment with garments that allow bleach?

Yes, as long as you choose the detergent for the strictest label in the load. Most universal detergents contain oxygen bleach, so a load containing a crossed-out triangle needs a bleach-free or colour detergent. The other garments lose nothing by being washed without bleach; the one garment that forbids it would have lost its dye permanently.

Do I really need a separate load for one do-not-tumble-dry item?

No, and this is the most common wasted load. A drying restriction is not a washing restriction. Wash the garments together if their tubs and triangles agree, then pull the no-tumble item out when you unload the washer and lay it flat or hang it. You have spent ten seconds instead of a second wash cycle.

How many ISO care symbols are there, and do I need to know them all?

There are 44 symbols in the ISO care labelling system, built from five basic shapes: tub, triangle, square, iron and circle. You do not need to memorise all 44 to sort laundry. For sorting you need the tub, the triangle and the square, which is roughly half of them; the iron and the circle matter after the wash, not during it.

Does a laundry symbols app need an internet connection?

It should not, and this one does not. Decoding a care label is a lookup against a fixed table of 44 symbols, so there is nothing a server can add. Laundry Symbols does the scanning and the matching on the phone itself, which also means the photographs of your clothes never leave the device or reach anyone else's server.

Where is my saved closet stored, and can other apps see it?

It stays in the app's own private directory on the phone. Android gives every app a storage area that other apps cannot read, and that no permission grants access to; the list is removed if you uninstall the app. Nothing is uploaded, and the Google Play Data safety entry declares no data collected and no data shared.

Is there an iPhone version of this app?

No. Laundry Symbols is published on Google Play only, so there is no App Store listing and no iOS download link anywhere in this article. If you use an iPhone, the practical alternative is the paper route: read the tub, the triangle and the square yourself, and keep the three-pass sorting method described above, which needs no software at all.

What if the care label has faded to the point of being unreadable?

Then treat the garment as the most cautious fibre it plausibly is, and put it in the gentlest load you are running. Wool, silk and viscose punish a wrong guess far more than cotton does, so guessing downward costs you a slightly longer wash and guessing upward can cost you the garment. Where a brand publishes care information online, check there before you guess.

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