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SEWING MACHINE SAFETY

Clover Safe notes are intended primarily for 4-H volunteers and members nine years and older.

Information available from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission indicates a total of approximately 2,700 people were treated in hospitals for sewing machine injuries during 2005. Most of the injuries (60%) were puncture wounds and cuts to fingers. Many of the injuries were caused by operator error or inattention and could have been prevented by understanding how a sewing machine works and maintaining awareness of potential hazards.



*Photograph Courtesy of
Tuolumne County 4-H Program*

Pre-Use Activities

- Thoroughly review and understand information provided in the owner's manual with particular attention given to descriptions of safety procedures.
- Before using, always inspect the sewing machine for damage or disrepair, including the power cord. Assure all ventilation openings are clear of lint and scrap cloth. Also, inspect all machine settings and adjustments and modify as necessary for the sewing task you intend to perform.
- If a sewing machine fails your pre-use inspection, notify your group leader, parent, or guardian. Do not use the sewing machine until it has been repaired.

Operating Precautions

- Only use a sewing machine for its intended purpose as described in the operator's manual.
- Use the proper type and size needle for the fabric being sewn.
- Prior to use, always inspect the needle to make sure it is not bent, dulled, or damaged. Never use a bent or damaged needle.
- For zig-zag or any other special stitching, use a throat plate that accommodates a wide stitch.
- Always maintain a safe zone, of about one inch, around the presser foot where fingers never enter when the sewing machine is operating. Try to keep your fingers to the side of the presser foot rather than in front of it.
- Learn to start and run the machine slowly and evenly. Operating the backstitch lever or knob takes practice.
- If the machine is difficult to start, gently turn the balance wheel to assist it.
- At the end of a row of stitching, turn the balance wheel away from you until the thread take up is at its top position. Then raise the presser foot and pull the fabric away.
- Never sew with the presser foot in a raised position. Do not force the fabric forward or backward while sewing. Hold the fabric firmly between your fingers and allow the feed dogs to pull the fabric.
- Never sew across pins. Remove each pin before it is pulled under the presser foot. Carefully use straight pins and when done using them, place in a proper storage container such as a pin cushion or plastic box.
- When using a serger, keep your fingers a safe distance from the knife blades.
- Never look away from the machine while it is sewing. If you need to look away, stop sewing first.
- Do not use magnetic pin dishes or other magnetized objects near an electronic sewing machine.
- When using shears, cut away from your body in regular, small strokes. Resting the shears against a table allows for better cutting control. It is easier to cut from right to left when you are right handed and from left to right when left handed. Clip threads with small scissors or a thread clip rather than large sewing shears.
- Always turn the sewing machine off and unplug from the power source before changing the light bulb, lubricating machine parts, and/or cleaning the machine.
- Regularly use a lint brush to clean the area around the bobbin. Remove the throat plate and brush out all the visible bits of thread and fuzz that accumulate. If you do it every time you wind the bobbin, you won't forget.
- It is recommended that sewing machines be lubricated every 6 months and sergers every 3 months. Follow the instructions in the owner's manual. If the machine has been stored or unused for a long time, lubricate and test the machine before using.
- Clean up the work space when finished with your sewing task.
- If you suffer a puncture or cut wound, tell your group leader, parent, or guardian. Wash the wound with soap and water and cover with a clean bandage. Seek medical attention if the wound is large/deep or appears to be infected.