

Truths and myths of dryer fires

Our experts set the record straight

Here's a frightening claim: Fabric-softener sheets can burn out the heating unit of your clothes dryer and possibly cause a fire. That's the warning in an e-mail message sent to one of our readers, who asked us whether it's true.

The short answer is no, though dryer fires are a real hazard and there are ways to protect yourself.

In the e-mail, an unknown author warns of a clothes dryer's burned-out heating unit. According to a "repair man," the author writes, the burnout was caused by fabric-sheet film buildup on the lint filter. "You can't SEE the film, but it's there," the author writes. "This is also what causes dryer units to catch fire and potentially burn the house down." The best way to avoid these problems, according to the "repairman," is to take that filter out and wash it with hot soapy water and an old toothbrush (or other brush) at least every six months.

But according to *Consumer Reports* testers, this e-mail mixes a lot of hyperbole with only a few helpful dryer-maintenance tips. At Consumer Reports we've tested hundreds of clothes dryers for our ongoing [dryer Ratings and recommendations](#) (available to subscribers). *CR's* appliance director, Mark Connelly, says it's possible that over a long period, fabric sheets, fabric softeners, and laundry detergent ingredients contribute to an unseen film or waxy buildup on the dryer lint screen. But "it's highly doubtful," he said, "that any such invisible buildup alone leads to heating-unit burnout or a fire."

Improper dryer vents are a much bigger and more common safety problem. Here are a few tips to keep your clothes dryer running safely and efficiently.

- Use metal dryer ducts to help prevent dryer fires. *Consumer Reports* says that flexible dryer ducts made of foil or plastic are the most problematic because they can sag and let lint build up at low points. Ridges can also trap lint. Metal ducts, either flexible or solid, are far safer because they don't sag, so lint is less likely to build up. In addition, if a fire does start, a metal duct is more likely to contain it. See our [dryer venting safety report](#) for more tips as well as photos and a dryer-venting video.
- No matter which kind of duct you have, you should clean it regularly. In addition, remove the visible lint from the lint screen each time you use your dryer. This not only will reduce the risk of a fire, but your clothes will dry faster and your dryer will use less energy. If dryer film is a worry, there is certainly no harm in occasionally cleaning the lint filter with warm soapy water and a small brush.
- Clean inside, behind, and underneath the dryer, where lint can also build up.
- Take special care drying clothes stained with volatile chemicals such as gasoline, cooking oils, cleaning agents, or finishing oils and stains. Wash the clothing more than once to minimize the amount of these chemicals on the clothing, and line dry instead of using a dryer.
- Avoid using liquid fabric softener on all-cotton clothing made of fleece, terry cloth, or velour. In our flammability tests, liquid fabric softener added to rinse water accelerated the burning speed of these fabrics. If you want a softener, use dryer sheets instead.
- Buy dryers that use moisture sensors rather than ordinary thermostats to end the auto-dry cycle. Thermostats can allow the dryer to run longer than necessary.
- "Occasionally wipe the sensor with a soft cloth or cotton ball and rubbing alcohol to keep it functioning accurately. Sensors are usually located on the inside of the dryer, just below the door opening, and can be hard to find. They are usually two metallic strips, shaped somewhat like the letter "C".

To find the clothes dryer and a washing machine that best meet your needs, see our [dryer Ratings and recommendations](#), and our [washing machine Ratings and recommendations](#) (available to subscribers). For advice on whether repairing your broken dryer or washer is worthwhile, see our [repair or replace report](#).