Stable Stitches

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One of the most important keys to creating professional-looking embroidery is choosing the correct stabilizer. A common question among most embroiderers is, “How do I choose the right stabilizer?” but that is only one of many questions that can be asked about stabilizer. So let’s have a conversation with an OESD Educator to find the answers that will yield the best embroidery results.

The Rule of Three

Keep these three facts in mind for all of your embroidery projects:

1. You Need Stabilizer: The hoop holds the fabric and the stabilizer keeps the fabric from moving, puckering, or stretching while it is being stitched. It is impossible to stitch beautiful embroidery without stabilization.

2. Follow These General Guidelines: Use Cut-Away on knits, Tear-Away on wovens, and Wash-Away when you don’t want any stabilizer left in the design.

3. Hoop Whenever Possible: Adhere the stabilizer to the fabric using 101 Quilt Basting Spray and hoop the layers, making them smooth, but not stretched, in the hoop.
What is stabilizer?

OESD Educator: Stabilizer is a backing or topping that prevents puckering and stretching of the fabric during, and in the case of cut-away, after, embroidery. Some of you know from experience what happens when you don’t use a stabilizer. It can make a big mess, resulting in puckering, loose stitches, and less than beautiful designs!

How do I choose the right stabilizer?

OESD Educator: There are many variables to consider when assessing which stabilizer is right for the project. Remember to always do a test “sew-out” to help you make your final choice. Before you get to the testing point, start with two questions:

1. What design have I chosen?
   The design tells the weight of fabric it can be stitched on. For instance, if it is a design that has simple outlines and few stitches, use a lightweight fabric. If the design has many stitches, use a mid- to heavyweight fabric.

2. What type of fabric will I be using?
   The fabric type will tell you to choose a cut-away, tear-away or wash-away type of stabilizer. A Cut-Away stabilizer is the most versatile; stretch fabrics such as knits, sweaters, sweatshirts, Lycra, fleece, denim, and fabrics that are loosely woven should always be stabilized with a cut-away because the stitches need to be stable during washing and wearing. You can also use a cut away on woven fabrics with designs that have lots of stitches. A Tear-Away stabilizer is best for non-stretch fabrics such as quilting cottons, poly/cotton fabrics, canvas, towels, vinyl and leather. A Wash-Away stabilizer washes completely from the fabric, and can be used for cutwork, stand-alone lace and reverse appliqué. Once you have determined the type of stabilizer to use, you can select one or two within that category to test.

What if I test a couple of different stabilizers and it still doesn’t look right?

OESD Educator:
Then you consider the question, “How many stitches does the design have?” If it has many stitches and you have used only one layer of stabilizer, then it will probably still pucker. Test with two layers of each of the stabilizers to narrow it down. Also, be sure that the fabric and stabilizer are hooped together, and that the stabilizer is adhered to the fabric with temporary spray adhesive. If using more than one layer of stabilizer, adhere the layers together with the temporary spray adhesive. That produces a good foundation, which then produces a successful project.

I stitched my design on a t-shirt using a cut-away stabilizer. Why is it stiff?

OESD Educator: This is another common question. If Heavyweight Cut-Away stabilizer was used, it will cause the shirt to be too stiff. It is for heavier fabrics or for items that need to be stiff, such as inside pages of a fabric book. The better choice for a t-shirt and for any baby and children’s knit items is PolyMesh Cut-Away. It has an extra-soft feel, which doesn’t irritate the skin, and still has plenty of strength to keep the embroidery stitches looking good after lots of washing and wearing. PolyMesh can be used in multiple layers to hold higher stitch count embroideries. Another great choice is Fusible PolyMesh Cut-Away, which can be pressed onto the wrong side of the fabric with a medium warm iron, eliminating the use of temporary spray adhesive.
I heard that I could use tear-away stabilizer for paper piecing, is that true?

**OESD Educator:** Yes, LightWeight Tear-Away can be used for paper piecing. Just cut the sheets to be paper size (8½” x 11”) and place one at a time in the printer to print the piecing pattern. The Ultra Clean and Tear is a medium weight tear-away and can also be used for paper piecing. Do a paper piecing test with each of the stabilizers before choosing which one to use.

Help! I stitched a monogram on a towel and the loops of the towel are poking through the embroidery. How can I keep that from happening?

**OESD Educator:** Use AquaFilm Topping on top of the towel. AquaFilm Topping is a lightweight wash-away to be used on top of napped fabrics such as corduroy, velvet, fleece, polar fleece, knits, towels, terry cloth, velour items, etc. Place it over the area to be embroidered. After stitching, remove the stabilizer gently by holding the stitched area and tearing most of the topping away. The remainder can be washed, sprayed, or dabbed away with a towel or cotton swab. A damp towel can also be placed over the top of the remainder of the stabilizer to gently steam it away.

What is the difference in BadgeMaster and AquaMesh, and which is the best?

**OESD Educator:** These are both wash-away products, but there are a few differences between BadgeMaster and AquaMesh. BadgeMaster is a starch-based product that will leave some stiffness behind after being rinsed out. In most cases, the stabilizer can be torn away when the embroidery is complete, then any excess can be dissolved. AquaMesh will rinse away (after excess stabilizer is trimmed), leaving no stiffness to the embroidery. Based on the differences, it is not a matter of which is the best, but rather of which you prefer. For example, if you prefer stiffer lace, use BadgeMaster; if you want softer lace, use AquaMesh.

What do I use if I am stitching on a garment that is difficult to hoop?

**OESD Educator:** There are several specialty stabilizers that can be used. The specialties fit into the same three groups that I have already mentioned: Cut-Away, Tear-Away & Wash-Away.

Available in both cut-away and tear-away versions, Hydro-Stick is a stabilizer with starch-based glue on one side (the shiny side) that is water activated. Hoop the stabilizer with the shiny side up in the hoop. Lightly dampen a sponge or use a sponge applicator and wipe the shiny side of the stabilizer. This activates the glue so the fabric will adhere to the stabilizer. To remove the Hydro-Stick, dampen the edge of the fabric with the sponge and wait 30 seconds, and then separate the stabilizer from the fabric. Continue until the fabric is completely released. Hydro-Stick is great for collar points, socks, gloves, towels, caps, jeans, and bags with zippers. Items using Hydro-Stick will be stiff until laundered. Once laundered, the starch washes away and the item will soften making it great for t-shirts and sweaters.

Stabil-Stick, a paper-backed adhesive stabilizer, is also available in cut-away and tear-away versions and is perfect for designs that require multiple hoopings. Hoop the Stabil-Stick with the paper side up and use the Embroiderer’s Wand to score the paper. Remove the paper to expose the adhesive and adhere the item to the area.

AquaMesh Plus is a wash-away paper-backed adhesive and works like Stabil-Stick. Hoop the stabilizer with the paper side up and use the Embroiderer’s Wand to score the paper. Remove the paper to expose the adhesive and adhere the item to the area. AquaMesh Plus washes away with water and is wonderful for sheer, slippery fabrics like chiffon.

**Specialty Stabilizers Tip:** Use a titanium needle; it helps in cutting down the gumming up of the needles.
OESD Stabilizers At-A-Glance

**CUT-AWAY**

- **HeavyWeight Cut-Away** – Good for most fabrics, this versatile stabilizer is especially good for sweatshirts, polar fleece and knit fabrics. Also works well with dense designs on any fabric.

- **X-tra HeavyWeight Cut-Away** – Same as above; can be used when more stabilization is needed. Use one layer of X-tra HeavyWeight instead of two layers of HeavyWeight.

- **PolyMesh Cut-Away** – This extra-soft stabilizer doesn’t irritate the skin and can be used on almost anything. Available in white, beige, black, the beige is good for use with light-colored fabric to avoid shadows from the trimmed stabilizer.

- ** Fusible PolyMesh Cut-Away** – same as above but can be fused to the fabric to prevent stretching. This stabilizer remains on the fabric to support the embroidery during washing and wearing.

**TEAR-AWAY**

- **LightWeight Tear-Away** – Use with lightweight fabrics such as quilting cottons and linen. Use more layers for dense designs or where more stabilization is needed.

- **MediumWeight Tear-Away** – Only available in black for darker fabrics to prevent the stabilizer from showing through to the right side of the fabric.

- **Ultra Clean and Tear** – This medium weight stabilizer is perfect for cotton quilting fabrics, and can also be printed for use in foundation piecing. Easily tears away, remains soft and disintegrates with washing.

**WASH-AWAY**

- **AquaFilm Topping** – Used on top of fabrics with a nap or pile, such as terry cloth, velour, or velvet to keep the thread from sinking into the fabric. Placed on top of fabric; does not need to be hooped.

- **AquaFilm Backing** – Used to stabilize fine fabrics such as batiste and projects where all traces of stabilizer need to be removed. Several layers can be used for stitching stand-alone items such as lace.

- **BadgeMaster** – Three times the weight of AquaFilm, this stabilizer is good for stand-alone laces and for projects where all stabilizer needs to be removed. Can be only partially rinsed for a stiff effect.

- **AquaMesh** – Can be used for many of the same applications as BadgeMaster, but rinses away easier and faster. Good for any project in which only the thread should remain.

- **AquaMesh Plus** – Same as AquaMesh but backed with a pressure-sensitive adhesive. Use it for items that cannot be hooped, such as collars and cuffs; also good for sheer, slippery fabrics such as chiffon.

**SPECIALTY STABILIZERS**

- **Stabil-Stik Cut-Away** – This cut-away stabilizer with a pressure-sensitive backing is good for large designs that require multiple hoopings; also good for knits that can’t be hooped.

- **Stabil-Stik Tear-Away** – This tear-away stabilizer with a pressure-sensitive backing is good to use with stable fabric items that cannot be hooped such as towels, bags, collars, cuffs, etc.

- **Hydro-Stick Cut-Away** – For knits such as t-shirts, sweatshirts, and golf shirts, the glue on this medium weight stabilizer is repositionable as long as it is wet. Good for items that can’t be hooped.

- **Hydro-Stick Tear-Away (1.8 oz.)** – For use with lightweight wovens such as quilting cottons and linen.

- **Hydro-Stick Tear-Away (2.5oz.)** – Great when extra stiffness is desired; perfect for patches, purses, heavy towels, caps, and hats.