

All models we tested can handle straight seams and zigzag stitches; many offer more than 100 stitches. Match the machine to the tasks you'll perform—basic repairs and alterations, frequent projects, or quilting and embroidering. Beginners and intermediates should consider buying a bit more machine than they need because their skills and interest might grow.

Mechanical or electronic?

You'll have to set most of the controls by hand on mechanical models, and they have fewer stitches. But they're less expensive and fine for basic sewing. Many electronic sewing machines have touchpad controls and recommend the best stitch, settings, presser foot, and more, based on the material. Don't be intimidated. All of the electronic models in our tests were easy to use. Some have programmable memory, so you can save stitch and letter settings.

Embroidery machines combine sewing and embroidery functions. The machine holds a hoop under its needle and moves the hoop in four directions as the needle sews. You push a start button, watch, and change thread colors. You'll need a computer for access to all its capabilities. Some machines are more intuitive to use than others, but there's still a learning curve.

Take a test drive

Independent dealers will usually let you try the machine in the store. So take a project with you or at least a few fabrics. If tryouts aren't allowed, ask about returns.

Never pay full price

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Learn about repair policies

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Many dealers offer in-store service. If not, they'll send you to a repair center or to the manufacturer. No matter who will do the repairs, ask about turnaround time, which can vary from days to weeks. Remember that repairs made by technicians who are not factory-authorized can void the manufacturer's warranty. And keep your machine's box and packaging, in case it needs to be shipped for repairs.