Why Does Indigo Rub Off on Clothes and Furniture?

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Read the illustrated guide

Learn why indigo can leave blue marks, how rubbing differs from bleeding in the wash, and what to check before it touches light fabrics.

Why the blue rubs off

Indigo can leave a blue mark when rubbing transfers color from the surface of dyed cloth to another material. This is called crocking. It can happen when the fabric is dry or damp. If you find a mark, separate the two surfaces and note where they touched.

Sources: AATCC — Colorfastness to Crocking (TM8) · Cotton Incorporated — Colorfastness of Cotton Textiles

Start with the shape and position of the mark. A narrow streak on a light shirt that lines up with a blue shoulder strap gives you a contact point to inspect. The streak alone cannot tell you how the cloth was dyed or finished.

Tell rub-off from bleeding in water

First, check how the blue appeared. A mark that follows a rubbed area points to contact transfer (A). Blue rinse or wash water shows color entering the water (B). A damp strap can still leave a mark by rubbing, so record both the contact and the moisture.

Sources: AATCC — Colorfastness to Crocking (TM8) · Cotton Incorporated — Colorfastness of Cotton Textiles

Illustration. A shows a mark where two surfaces rubbed. B shows color in rinse or wash water. The blue intensity is schematic and does not measure how much dye transferred. View the illustration in the online guide

Judge the two observations separately. Even after the rinse water runs clear, a strap can still leave blue where it rubs. Use the contact mark to decide where to protect light fabric.

Sources: AATCC — Colorfastness to Crocking (TM8) · Cotton Incorporated — Colorfastness of Cotton Textiles

Check the piece’s finishing and care directions

Next, check what has already been done. For a home-dyed piece, compare your rinse and wash with the instructions for the method you used. If you missed a step, complete it as directed before checking again. For a purchased item, follow its care label and ask the maker if the instructions are unclear.

Sources: Jacquard — Indigo Tie Dye Kit Quick Start

Then, if you have a matching scrap, use it to check for visible dry transfer. Lightly rub a clean, dry white cotton scrap over the dry dyed sample (1). Compare the rubbed area with an unused part of the white cloth in even light (2).

Home dry-rub observation. In 1, lightly rub clean, dry white cotton over a dry matching sample. In 2, compare the rubbed and unused areas in the same light. The drawing shows one possible result, with no measured colorfastness grade. View the illustration in the online guide

Visible blue is a reason to keep the piece away from light fabrics in similar use. A clean white scrap only describes that spot under those dry conditions. Damp contact, heavier rubbing, or another area may behave differently. AATCC TM8 measures dry and wet rubbing separately under controlled conditions.

Sources: AATCC — Colorfastness to Crocking (TM8)

Plan around the places that rub

Keep a rubbing strap away from pale clothes. If a dyed textile leaves blue on a light seat, move it away or use a washable cover that stays in place between the two surfaces. Check the cover for blue and wash it separately as its label directs. Keep damp dyed textiles away from light items while they dry.

Sources: Levi's — Dark denim and dye transfer

Illustration. A shows direct contact. B shows a washable cover between the two materials. Check and wash the cover if it picks up blue. View the illustration in the online guide

If something has already picked up blue, check the care instructions for the stained item. Wash a washable garment promptly as its label allows. For upholstery, use the furniture maker's instructions for that surface.

Sources: Levi's — Dark denim and dye transfer

Give the maker an example they can use

If transfer continues after the recommended care, photograph the mark and the matching contact area. Record whether each surface was dry or damp, which part rubbed, and how the dyed piece was last washed. Keep the textile away from the affected surface while you check the next step.

For a purchased item, send those details to the maker and ask how they recommend using and caring for it. For a home-dyed piece, add the dye product and the rinse and wash steps you followed so you can compare future samples under the same conditions.

References

- AATCC — Colorfastness to Crocking (TM8)
- Cotton Incorporated — Colorfastness of Cotton Textiles
- Jacquard — Indigo Tie Dye Kit Quick Start
- Levi's — Dark denim and dye transfer

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