



Sweater knits are known for their striking textures and easy wearability. Unlike most finer-gauge knits, the stitches in a sweater knit are often arranged into complex patterns of cables, ribs, multicolor jacquards, or textural tuck combinations that mimic classic hand knits. Sweater knits can range from delicate and lacy to bulky and full of body.

The very properties that draw us to sweater knits, however, can make them challenging to cut and sew. The relatively large stitches of a true sweater knit, once cut, tend to fray or run. The fabric's comfortable give can stretch out of shape through handling and sewing, leaving you with unattractive, rippled seams. Hems and edges are not typically pressed into sharp creases you are accustomed to in wovens and fine machine knits.

The good news is that there are reliable methods that can turn sweater sewing into a fun and rewarding project.

#### **SELECT AND PREP THE FABRIC**

One of the most enjoyable steps when planning a cut-and-sew sweater project is choosing the fabric. Your fabric selection helps dictate your choice of sewing pattern. If this is your first time working with sweater knits, look for a fabric with a high percentage of wool or cotton. Natural fibers respond well to steam, which is essential throughout the construction process.

A flat rib or a double-knit jacquard knit is a good choice for a first project. Save the bulky, drapey, or very stretchy fabrics until you gain experience with the way sweater knits behave. Once you're more comfortable with sweater knits, simply choose a fabric you love. There's always a way to work with even the most unstable sweater knit. If you select a bulky knit, be sure four fabric layers can fit comfortably under your sewing machine's presser foot.





# Luscious Sweater Knits

Specialty fabrics that are surprisingly easy to sew

BY OLGALYN JOLLY

*Sew a cozy cardigan with a textured sweater fabric. Special techniques enhance the garment's drape and longevity.*

*Pattern: author's design. Fabric: Providence wool sweater knit, Shop.OJolly.net.*

As with any fabric, prepare the sweater knit by laundering it in the same manner you'll use for the finished garment. Before laundering, zigzag or overlock all unfinished edges to prevent runs and raveling. Lay woolen knits flat to air-dry. If you opt to tumble-dry a cotton or synthetic-blend sweater knit, remove the fabric from the dryer while it's slightly damp. With all sweater-knit fabrics, when the fabric is still slightly damp, square it: Hover a steam iron a couple of inches above the fabric and allow the steam to penetrate the knit. Then pat the fabric into shape with your hand. Allow it to dry thoroughly before moving it.

#### CHOOSE A SUITABLE PATTERN

Commercial sewing patterns that work well with sweater knits are increasingly available. The best options are those with a

minimum number of seams and no darts. The more unstable your fabric is, the more basic your pattern should be. Be sure the knit's crosswise stretch corresponds with the stretch gauge on the pattern envelope. A sweater with a classic fit skims, rather than hugs, the body. It should have a little ease at the bust and the hips. It may have a minimally defined waistline or no waistline definition.

The sewing techniques I'm sharing ensure a beautiful, long-wearing sweater that's better made than many high-priced, ready-to-wear examples. Hand knitters take note: Even if you enjoy knitting sweaters, you'll love fashioning a close facsimile in a fraction of the time.

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# Prepare the pieces

A controlled layout, proper cutting, and careful stabilization are essential for successful sewing with sweater knits.

## LAYOUT AND CUTTING

**Cut in a single layer.** You'll have more control.

**Choose a with-nap layout.** Except for sweater knits with a plain jersey structure and simple balanced ribs, many sweater knits have a one-way textural design.

**Weight, don't pin.** Weights are faster and easier to use than pins and work nicely to hold pattern pieces in place for cutting.

**Use a rotary cutter.** This ensures that the fabric stays as flat as possible while cutting. Sharp shears also make an excellent cutting tool.

**Don't notch.** Never cut a notch into a seam allowance. Instead, use a fabric marker to draw the notch in the seam allowance, or make tailor's tacks.

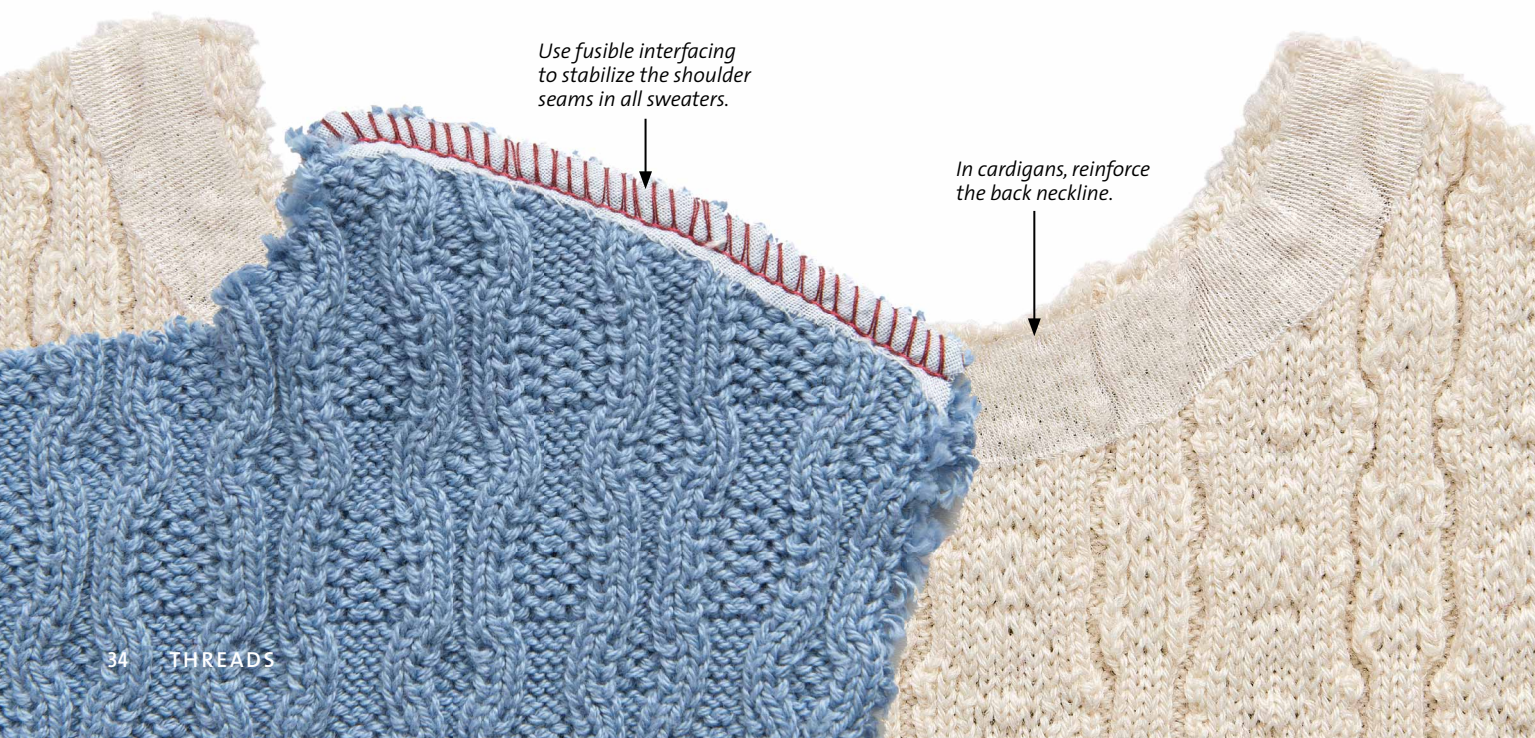
**Widen the seam allowances.** Sweater knits are often unstable close to the cut edge. Plan for a wider seam allowance, 1/2 inch wide or more, than is typically used with a finer-gauge knit.



## STABILIZING DURING CONSTRUCTION

**Stabilize the shoulder seams.** Sew bias tape or fuse interfacing onto the shoulder seams.

**Prevent stretching in cardigans.** When a cardigan is open, the back neck supports much of the cardigan's weight and is prone to stretching. Support the back neckline with a strip of fusible interfacing.



Photos: (pp. 32–33; p. 37, right) Jack Deutsch; all others, Mike Yamin. Stylist: Jessica Saal. Hair and makeup: Agata Helena.com. Styling credits: (pp. 32–33) hair clip, skirt, and Jeffrey Campbell boots—FreePeople.com; (p. 37) earrings—Ethika (Nordstrom Rack), pants—J.Crew.com.





Three rib knits from Shop.OJolly.net show the range of options in sweater knits. From left: wool novelty two-color rib, cotton novelty rib, and cotton flat rib. Try a walking foot for better control when sewing knits.

## Construct a sweater

You can sew a professional-looking sweater with a regular sewing machine or a serger. Choose seam and edge treatments that keep the sweater from stretching out of shape.

### SMOOTH SEAMS

**Test settings on scraps.** The settings noted below are starting points: Adjust as needed for your fabric and machine.

**Select the right needle.** Use a ballpoint or jersey needle, size 80/12 or 90/14.

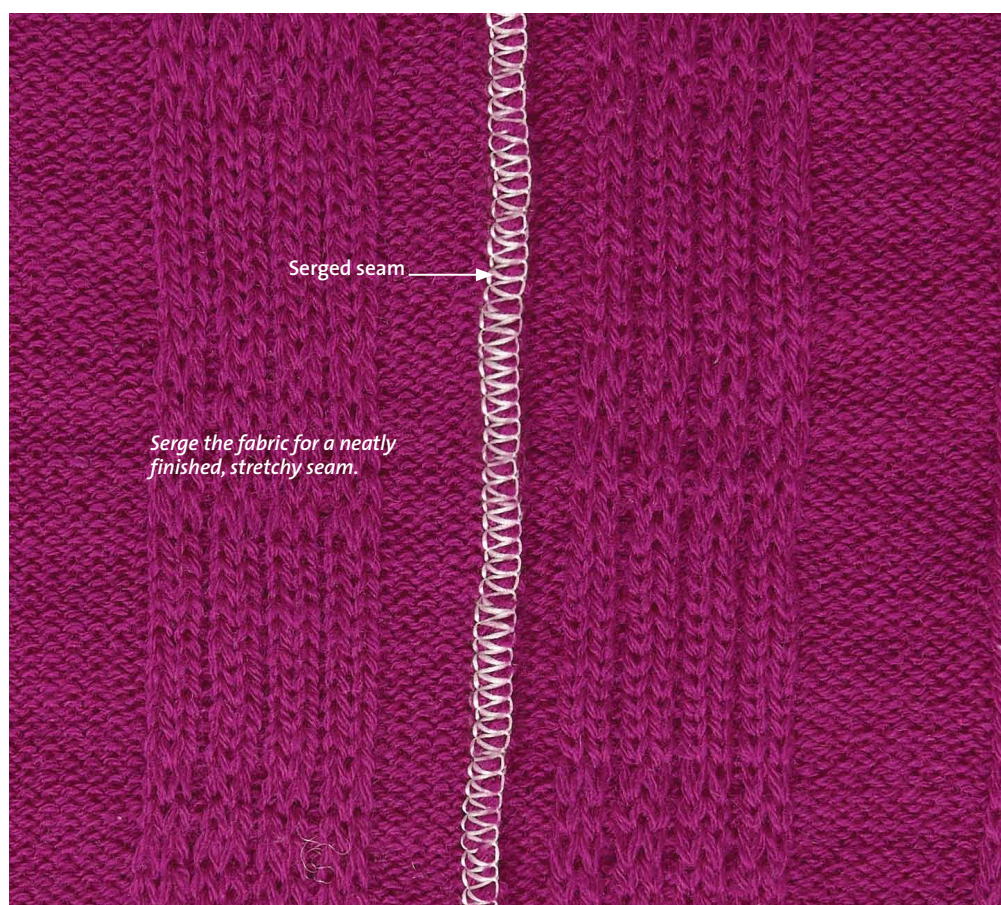
**Use a zigzag stitch.** On the sewing machine, set the zigzag stitch for a length of 2.75 mm and width of 0.75 mm.

**Finesse the presser foot.** If you can, reduce the presser foot pressure to reduce rippling. Consider trying a walking, or even-feed, foot for more even fabric feed.

**Serge with differential feed.** Use a three- or four-thread overlock stitch, and set the differential feed between 1.5 and 2.0 for flat seams.

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*Serge the fabric for a neatly finished, stretchy seam.*

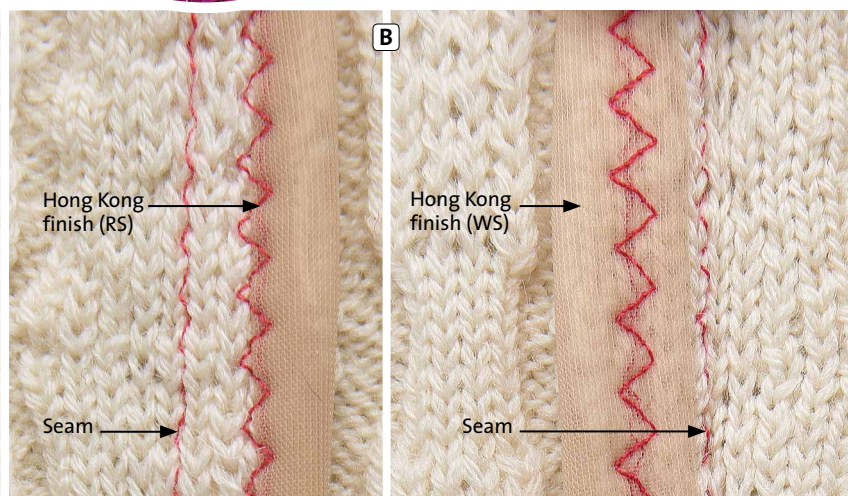


## NEAT SEAM ALLOWANCES

**Zigzag the seam allowances.** With a regular or three-step zigzag, 4.0 mm wide, finish the seam allowances. Trim close to the stitches to reduce bulk and potential raveling.

**Bind the seam allowances.** Create a stretchy Hong Kong finish by zigzagging strips of stretch mesh or lightweight knit to the seam allowances (A), then wrapping the mesh around the raw edges. Zigzag the free edge to the allowance to secure (B).

**Steam the seams.** Hold the iron above the fabric, steam the material, and pat the seam flat. Let the fabric dry.

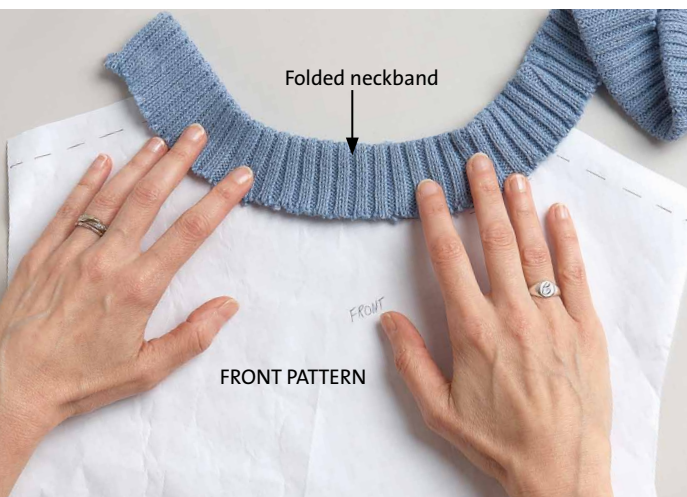


*Make a Hong Kong finish that gives, using stretch mesh to wrap the seam allowances' raw edges. Apply the mesh with a zigzag stitch.*

## CUSTOM NECKBANDS

If your sweater has a neckband, your best option is to custom-fit the band length to the garment, rather than using a standardized neckband pattern. This enables you to take into account your chosen fabric's stretch and recovery.

Determine the proper band length by stretching the folded band fabric to comfortably match the circumference of the neckline. Add seam allowances and you've got the perfect size band for your fabric and pattern size.



*Gently stretch the folded neckband along the pattern's neckline edge to determine the proper length for the fabric and sweater size. Be sure to check the front and back edges.*







*Baste, then serge, a stretch mesh strip to the hem allowance's wrong side. Then hand-sew the hem.*

STRETCH MESH STRIP

Basting stitches

Catchstitches

## FLAT HEMS

If hemming, don't sew a knit with poor recovery directly to itself; the hem tends to flare out. Instead, apply a fine stretch mesh or lingerie elastic along the hem allowance to ensure good recovery at the hem. Baste a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-wide strip of stretch mesh to the hem allowance's wrong side. Serge the raw edge, catching the mesh in the serging. Press the hem allowance up and hand-sew with a catchstitch. Steam well after sewing, and pat the hem flat.

## TIPS FOR OPENWORK KNITS

Lacy and stretchy fabrics may require stabilization even to cut. Trace the pattern outline onto the fabric with a fabric marker. Before cutting, carefully apply liquid or fusible stabilizer to the seam allowance area. Always test your method on scraps first. If using a liquid stabilizer, such as Sulky Super Solvy dissolved in water, allow it to dry completely before cutting the fabric. If using iron-on interfacing as a stabilizer, press with an iron using an up-and-down motion, not a back-and-forth motion.



Fusible interfacing



*A simple silhouette lets an interesting textural knit shine.*

*Pattern: Sew House Seven  
Toaster Sweaters, view 2. Fabric:  
Washington Square wool knit,  
Shop.Ololly.net.*

## web extra

Watch a video about how differential feed helps with serging knits, at [ThreadsMagazine.com](http://ThreadsMagazine.com).