

The Difference Between Front- and Top-loading Clothes Washers | Earth 911

Gemma Alexander



Unlike other green habits, reducing your [home appliance footprint](#) doesn't require you to make time-consuming lifestyle changes or learn new skills. It will even reduce your utility costs over the long run. But we can be surprisingly resistant to making even a simple change like upgrading appliances when it means giving up "features" that use extra energy or choosing a configuration we're not used to – like switching from a top-loading clothes washer to a front-loading one.

Shopping for Clothes Washers

As with [dishwashers](#), there is usually a trade-off between water efficiency and energy efficiency. The sources of your [electricity](#) and water will affect which of these you prioritize. If it's time for you to [upgrade](#) to a more efficient machine, Earth911 has identified the models on Energy Star's Most Efficient list that maximize both energy and water performance in its [buyer's guide](#).

[Energy Star](#) rated clothes washers use 25% less energy and 33% less water than the average washer on the market today, which is already significantly more efficient than ones made a decade ago. Energy Star uses Integrated Modified Energy Factor (IMEF) and Integrated Water Factor (IWF) to measure the per-cubic-foot efficiency of washers. The best washer will have a high IMEF and a low IWF.

Front-loading Washers

Energy Star's Most Efficient includes only front-load washers. Even the best top-loader will use about five gallons more water per wash than a front-loader. Energy Star [standards for top-loading washers](#) allow about 15% more water use than front-loaders because the tumbling motion of a front-loading washer is simply more effective at scrubbing clothes than soaking in an agitated tub. That is also the reason that in controlled tests, front-loading machines [outperform](#) top-loaders for cleaning power and reliability.

Top-loading Washers

Nevertheless, [76%](#) of Americans still buy top-loading clothes washers. For some people, bending over to load and unload a front-loading machine is uncomfortable. Others can't seem to break the habit of adding clothes mid-cycle, which is harder to do with the front door lock (but not impossible). Front-loading machines have a reputation for breaking down and for growing mold and mildew. Some of these problems are exaggerated or unfounded, and others can be overcome simply by managing your laundry a little differently.

Making Front-loading Washers Work for You

Ergonomics

If you can use a front-loading dryer without complaint, you probably just need to get used to the idea of doing the same with your washer. But if bending down is painful, pedestals elevate the machine 12-16 inches to a more convenient height. They often provide a drawer for extra storage. You can buy a matching pedestal, a standard-sized [pedestal](#), or you can [build your own](#).

Reliability

Early front-loading washing machines may have had problems, but when they break down today, the cause is usually [operator error](#). Many people are accustomed to stuffing their top-loading washers to physical capacity. But overfilling front-loaders puts extra pressure on the rear bearing of the tumbler, eventually leading to failure. The problem is easily avoided by running properly sized loads. Don't worry, even running smaller loads, your new front-loading washer is still saving water and energy.

Mold

If you use the wrong detergent, too much detergent, too much fabric softener, or let the machine stay wet between uses, mildew and mold will grow in your washer regardless of its configuration. Air does evaporate more easily from a top-loader, and mold is much easier to spot in a front-loading machine, so people who use front-loaders tend to [report more mold](#) problems than people with top-loaders. The problem has gotten better with time, but owners of front-loading machines do need to [be more careful](#) about using the right products, leaving the door ajar to let the machine dry between loads, and occasionally cleaning the rubber parts and running a tub clean cycle.

The Best Top-loading Washers



Even the best top-loading washer will use about five gallons more water per wash than a front-loader.

If you absolutely must purchase a top-loading washer, you will be settling for lower performance efficiency. Remember that the more efficient washer will have a higher IMEF (energy use) and a lower IWF (water use) rating.

	Top-loading	Front-loading
IMEF Standard	≥ 2.06	≥ 2.76
Best IMEF	2.76	3.1
IWF Standard	≤ 4.3	≤ 3.2
Best IWF	3.2	2.7

LG

LG makes nearly half of the Energy Star-certified top-loading washing machines. [Seven of these](#) models have the best score earned by a top-loading machine, with an IMEF of 2.76 and an IWF of 3.2. They range from 5.0 cubic feet of capacity to 5.7 cubic feet of capacity.

Kenmore

Of the nearly three dozen top-loading [Kenmores](#) that earned Energy Star certification, two can match the LG's top score. The 3171# and 3177# both have 5.5 cubic feet of capacity.

Samsung

The next highest score earned by a top-loading washer is IMEF 2.38 and IWF 3.7. Samsung's [WA52J806*A*](#) and [WA50K86**A*](#), with 5.2 and 5.0 cubic feet of capacity respectively, earn this score along with numerous LG and Kenmore models.

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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).



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