

Basic Sewing Stitches

Practice Guide

7 essential hand stitches with step-by-step instructions, fix-it notes, and 5-minute practice exercises for each stitch.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Running Stitch: your first and fastest hand stitch
- Backstitch: the strongest seam you can sew by hand
- Basting Stitch: temporary hold before permanent stitching
- Slip Stitch: invisible closures and hems
- Whip Stitch: raw edge finishing without a serger
- Blanket Stitch: decorative and structural edge finishing
- Catch Stitch: flexible hems for knits and heavy fabrics

Start with one stitch. Sew it on something real. Add the next when a project calls for it.

Before You Start: Supplies Checklist

- Hand sewing needles** Variety pack of sharps, size 7 or 8
- All-purpose polyester thread** Match to fabric or one shade darker
- Fabric scissors** Dedicated pair, never used on paper
- Needle threader** Under \$1, eliminates threading frustration
- Beeswax (optional)** Run thread across to reduce tangling
- Thimble (optional)** Protects pushing finger on thick fabrics

1. RUNNING STITCH

WHEN TO USE:

Simple seams, basting, gathering fabric, and light construction. The first stitch to learn.

HOW IT WORKS:

Push needle up through fabric, then back down 1/4 inch ahead. Repeat, keeping stitch length and spacing even. Load several stitches onto the needle before pulling through.

FIX-IT NOTE: Puckering means stitches are too tight. Loosen tension and hold fabric smooth, not stretched.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Sew a 6-inch running stitch line on scrap cotton. Aim for even spacing. Pull gently on both ends to test.

2. BACKSTITCH

WHEN TO USE:

Permanent seams, attaching buttons, any joint that needs to hold weight. The strongest hand stitch.

HOW IT WORKS:

Make one stitch forward. Bring needle up one stitch length ahead, then push back down at the exact end of the previous stitch. Creates a continuous line with no gaps, similar to machine stitching.

FIX-IT NOTE: Gaps between stitches mean the needle is not re-entering at the exact end of the last stitch.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Join two cotton scraps with a 4-inch backstitch seam. Tug both sides. The seam should hold without gaps.

3. BASTING STITCH

WHEN TO USE:

Temporarily holding fabric before permanent stitching. Use instead of pins on slippery or curved seams.

HOW IT WORKS:

Same motion as running stitch but with longer stitches (about 1/2 inch). Sew loosely so thread pulls out easily after permanent stitching. Think of it as a thread-based pin.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Baste two pieces along a curved edge. Sew a backstitch seam next to it, then pull the basting out.

4. SLIP STITCH (LADDER STITCH)

WHEN TO USE:

Closing openings invisibly (pillows, linings), finishing hand-sewn hems, attaching binding.

HOW IT WORKS:

Fold both raw edges inward. Bring needle up through one fold, cross to opposite fold, take a tiny bite (1/8 inch) inside that fold. Cross back and repeat. Pull snug every 3 to 4 stitches and the thread disappears.

FIX-IT NOTE: Stitches showing means you are picking up too much fabric per bite. Take smaller bites, pull firmly.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Close a small opening on a stuffed fabric scrap. The stitch line should be invisible from the outside.

5. WHIP STITCH

WHEN TO USE:

Preventing raw edges from fraying, finishing seam allowances, joining two finished edges.

HOW IT WORKS:

Bring needle from back to front, angling each stitch diagonally over the raw edge. Keep spacing consistent. The stitches wrap over the edge to contain loose fibers.

FIX-IT NOTE: Uneven angles mean inconsistent hand position. Keep the needle at the same angle for each stitch.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Whip stitch along a raw cotton edge for 4 inches. The edge should lie flat with no threads escaping.

6. BLANKET STITCH

WHEN TO USE:

Decorative edge finishing on felt, fleece, and applique. Both structural and ornamental.

HOW IT WORKS:

Insert needle from front to back, about 1/4 inch from the edge. Before pulling through, catch the working thread under the needle point. Pull snug to form a loop along the edge. Repeat at even intervals.

FIX-IT NOTE: Uneven loops mean inconsistent spacing. Mark stitch intervals with a pencil before starting.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Blanket stitch around a 4-inch felt square using contrasting thread. Aim for even loop spacing.

7. CATCH STITCH (HERRINGBONE)

WHEN TO USE:

Hemming knit fabrics, securing heavy hems, any hem that needs stretch and give.

HOW IT WORKS:

Work left to right. Take a small stitch in the garment fabric above the hem edge, then a small stitch in the hem fold below, creating a zigzag pattern. Keep stitches loose to allow movement.

FIX-IT NOTE: Popped hems mean stitches were too tight. The catch stitch must flex with the fabric.

5-MINUTE EXERCISE:

Fold a 1-inch hem on stretchy scrap fabric. Catch stitch it. Stretch fabric to confirm the hem holds.

Quick Reference: Which Stitch Do I Use?

I NEED TO...	USE THIS STITCH	STRENGTH
Join two pieces of fabric	Backstitch	Strongest
Temporarily hold fabric	Basting Stitch	Removable
Sew a quick, light seam	Running Stitch	Light
Close an opening invisibly	Slip Stitch	Moderate
Finish a raw edge	Whip Stitch	Moderate
Decorate an edge	Blanket Stitch	Moderate
Hem stretchy or heavy fabric	Catch Stitch	Flexible

PRO TIP: THREAD MANAGEMENT

- Cut thread no longer than 18 inches (elbow to fingertip). Longer thread tangles.
- Run thread across beeswax before stitching to reduce friction and knotting.
- Match thread color to fabric. If no exact match, go one shade darker.
- Use a single strand unless you need extra strength for heavy fabrics.
- Always secure your thread with 2 to 3 backstitches at the end of every seam.

Your Practice Path

Week 1: Master the running stitch and backstitch on scrap fabric.

Week 2: Learn the slip stitch. Close a real pillow opening or hem.

Week 3: Add the whip stitch or blanket stitch to finish a project edge.

Ongoing: Return to this guide when a new project calls for a new stitch.

Your Stitch Journal

Track your practice. Note what worked, what didn't, and what you want to try next.

Running Stitch

Date practiced: _____

Backstitch

Date practiced: _____

Slip Stitch

Date practiced: _____

Whip / Blanket / Catch Stitch

Date practiced: _____

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