

FAQS

Laboratory Coat Supply and Laundry at MIT (7/2017)

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LAB COAT FAQS

The following are common questions you may have about lab coats at MIT. Detailed information on lab coat selection and purchasing options can also be found on the [EHS](#) and Procurement [websites](#).

Lab Coat safety

Q: Why do I need to get a lab coat?

Lab coats are a primary means of protection in the laboratory environment when used in combination with other appropriate PPE and engineering controls.

In 2017, the MIT Committee on Toxic Chemicals expanded the policy requiring lab coats at MIT to state:

“A laboratory coat or equivalent protection is required when working with or when working nearby to hazardous chemicals, unsealed radioactive materials, and biological agents at BL2 or greater. A flame resistant lab coat is required when handling pyrophoric substances outside of a glove box. It is recommended that a flame resistant lab coat be worn when working with all flammable chemicals. Laboratory supervisors shall carry out a hazard assessment to identify situations (a task, experiment, or area) where alternative or more protective apparel must be worn.”

This policy means that most people working in a lab must wear a lab coat or equivalent, for some, if not all the work they do. In some cases, your lab or DLC may have more restrictive rules regarding appropriate use of lab coats.

Q: Do lab coats actually offer any protection for the hazards I work with?

Lab coats do offer protection of skin and personal clothing from incidental contact and small splashes. They also provide a removable barrier in the event of an incident involving a spill or splash of hazardous substances. However, for some hazards additional protective garments such as rubber aprons or additional engineering controls may be needed in combination with an appropriate lab coat. A hazard assessment should be performed to determine the appropriate protective gear for your experiments (<https://ehs.mit.edu/site/workplace-safety/personal-protective-equipment-ppe>).

Q: When should I wear a lab coat?

Lab coats are required at MIT when working with or working nearby to hazardous chemicals, unsealed radioactive materials, and biological agents at BL2 or greater as stated in the Chemical Hygiene Plan (CHP) template (<https://ehs.mit.edu/site/chemical-safety/chemical-hygiene-program/plan-template>). Flame resistant (FR) lab coats are required when handling pyrophoric materials outside of a glove box. Some DLCs or individual labs may have additional guidelines that are stricter than the CHP template wording.

Getting a Lab Coat

Q: How do I get a lab coat?

If you work in a lab, see your lab manager, EHS rep, or PI (supervisor).

If you are a supervisor (usually the PI) in a lab, you are required to ensure that people working in your lab, regardless of their position at MIT, have access to the PPE necessary for the hazards they will be encountering, including having access to clean lab coats. You have several options for providing the lab coats. See: [Setting Up a Lab Coat Service](#) below.

If you are a student in a class, see your instructor to obtain a lab coat.

If you are an instructor for a class with a lab component, your students may be required to wear lab coats depending on the nature of the work they will be doing. Details of who pays for classroom lab coats and how they are obtained vary based on department. Note that many disposable coats are made with materials that should not be used with an open flame such as a Bunsen burner. Contact EHS for help with determining the best materials and styles for your proposed classroom experiments.

Q: What if I want to buy a lab coat, but don't want to set up a laundry service?

You can buy lab coats from the Preferred Vendors without setting up a laundry service by contacting the chosen vendor directly. Prices for purchasing lab coats through North Star and Cintas, as well as contact information, can be found on the [Supplier Search](#) pages for each vendor.

You are not limited to using the Preferred Vendors for lab coats; you can choose to obtain your lab coats from other vendors such as VWR.

Note that soiled lab coats must be washed by a laundry company experienced with lab coats or discarded; lab coats cannot be washed at home.

Q: Lab coats never fit right. How can I get one that actually has a good fit?

MIT's Preferred Vendors for lab coats are able to do fittings for groups upon initial setup of a laundry service and for individuals as needed. In rare cases a user may find that standard coat sizes do not fit; in these cases it is possible to get custom tailored coats for an additional charge.

Q: What styles of lab coats are available?

There are a variety of styles to choose from in many different materials. From a protection standpoint EHS strongly recommends the following features:

- Tight cuffs (knitted or elastic)
- Snap closures on the front for easy removal in case of contamination
- Coats with different properties that are easy to tell apart (ex: FR coats should have outer markings clearly identifying them as FR coats and can be ordered in a different color than other coats present in the lab)
- Proper fit
- Appropriate material for hazards to be encountered

Procurement's [Supplier Search](#) pages list a variety of options that are available in the pricing guides for each vendor. When choosing which style(s) to obtain, keep the above safety recommendations in mind.

Further information on choosing the proper material can be found on the EHS website's [Laboratory Coat Selection, Use, and Care](#) document.

Q: Lab coats are expensive, why should I spend the extra money to get them and have them cleaned? And why doesn't MIT pay for the coats?

Lab coats are an essential means of providing protection against hazardous materials in the laboratory when used in combination with other PPE and engineering controls.

At MIT, the Committee on Toxic Chemicals decided in 2012 to revise the guidelines for lab coats at MIT to require them when working with hazardous chemicals, BL2 or greater biological materials, and open sources of radiation. This represents the minimum requirements for wearing lab coats at MIT. In some cases, labs or DLCs may have expanded the requirements to cover additional types of work or may specify type of lab coat for certain types of work.

Currently, PIs or lab supervisors are responsible for providing personal protecting equipment, including lab coats, for all people that will be encountering hazardous materials in the lab and for ensuring the lab coats are cleaned as needed. While MIT as an institute does not itself buy coats for its members, MIT EHS, in collaboration with Procurement, have established two lab coat providers as Preferred Vendors. Labs that obtain coats through one of these vendors, Cintas or North Star, will be able to obtain and launder coats at a low price that has been guaranteed for all MIT customers.

Laundering Lab Coats

Q: I have a coat, but how do I get it cleaned?

Personnel are not allowed to launder lab coats at home. Clean non-disposable lab coats routinely by use of a laundry service or work area washers and dryers. MIT has selected two laundry companies, Cintas and North Star, to be preferred vendors for lab coat laundry service. Both companies have experience helping groups of various sizes and needs set up and manage lab coat laundry services. See the [Supplier Search](#) pages for Cintas and North Star to get information on setting up a service.

Q: Will my coats be washed with those from other customers?

Yes, depending on the amount of coats you turn in at a given time your coats may be combined with similar coats from other customers.

Q: How will the laundry companies keep track of my coats?

Each laundry company has their own system for tracking lab coats. For example, Cintas uses barcodes on the lab coats for tracking their movement to/from the laundry facility, while North Star uses barcodes for visual identification and RFID chips in the coats for electronic tracking. The companies are able to use these codes at their facility to ensure that your coats end up back at your location and not at a different customer's location.

Each vendor can also generate reports based on the scanned information to help you determine the number of coats being washed and returned each cycle.

Q: How will I know how many coats are cleaned with each pickup?

Cintas and North Star do not routinely show these numbers on delivery slips, but can generate reports with this information upon request.

Q: What happens if my lab coat is damaged or contaminated by a spill?

This depends on the type of damage as well as whether the lab coat is rented or one you own.

Coats damaged due to contamination must be treated as hazardous waste. See your EHS rep or EHS coordinator for proper handling.

Rental coats damaged through normal wear and tear are replaced by Cintas or North Star when handed in. Replacement of the coat in this case is free with the exception of any custom tailoring (ex: addition of emblems). If the damage is not due to normal wear and tear, the lab will be charged.

Customer-owned coats can be repaired or replaced as needed, but this will incur an extra cost.

For an extra fee both Cintas and North Star have garment protection programs that cover replacement of lost coats or those damaged outside of normal wear and tear. These protection programs must be purchased prior to loss or damage of your coats.

Q: Is there a minimum number of coats that a lab must need to qualify for a rental program?

There is not a minimum number of coats that must be part of a laundry program.

Q: We already have a laundry service for lab coats, should I change to a Preferred Vendor?

The Preferred Vendors have been chosen as having the best combination of price and quality service, but you are not required to use one of these vendors. Your lab may see both cost savings and better service if you switch to a Preferred Vendor. Note that in some cases you may have a contract for your current service that will need to be terminated if you do choose to switch. Contact Jim Bagley at Procurement (jbagley@mit.edu) to discuss your options and what would be best for your current situation.

Managing a Lab Coat System

Q: I'd get a lab coat service for my lab/area, but won't it be too hard to manage?

It does take some work to successfully manage a lab coat service. However, both Preferred Vendors have experience in assisting customers at MIT to make the management process as easy as possible.

Q: Several labs are combining for a centralized service; how do we split the costs?

There are several models for dividing costs for shared lab coat service based on how you set up the shared service.

- Lab coats assigned to each person or to specific labs – this allows for creation of individual invoices for each lab. The labs can then pay using a PO, blanket PO, or ProCard.

- Stock program where all labs in the combined program get coats from a common set – this requires either a single source of funding, or for your finance people to split the costs of the coats in a pre-determined way such as by headcount.

Regardless of which option you choose, Preferred Vendors can assist you in setting up the service in a way that meets your payment needs.

Q: What if I have problems with the vendor?

As part of the Preferred Vendor program, Procurement has routine meetings with the vendors regarding their performance and ability to meet the needs of the MIT community. If you have a specific problem with one of the Preferred Vendors, please contact Procurement to assist you in resolving the problems.

Q: I already have a contract with one of the Preferred Vendors; should I do anything?

The new pricing should be applied automatically to existing customers. If your current invoices do not show a decrease in cost when compared to invoices generated prior to August 2013, or if your current invoice costs do not match the pricing sheets online on the [Supplier Search](#) pages for each vendor contact Jim Bagley at Procurement for assistance (jbagley@mit.edu).

Q: What if I want to cancel my contract early?

You may cancel your contract with one of the Preferred Vendors at any time. However, note that if you are renting coats from one of the vendors you may be responsible for paying for the lab coats in circulation at a pro-rated rate based on age of the lab coats. Contact Jim Bagley at Procurement (jbagley@mit.edu) if you are considering cancelling your contract for assistance.

Setting up a Lab Coat Service

Q: What options do I have to get lab coats?

There are several methods in which a lab can obtain lab coats.

- Rental coats -> many laundry companies provide rental coats in a rental/laundry system. The benefits of this type of program are that it limits up-front costs for labs and can include free repairs or replacements for coats damaged through normal wear and tear. More information on this type of program can be found on the Procurement website's [Supplier Search](#) pages for Cintas and North Star.
- Purchase reusable lab coats -> lab coats can be purchased from many sources, including Cintas and North Star; the EHS website's [Laboratory Coat Selection, Use, and Care](#) document includes ordering information for a variety of coat styles offered by the MIT Preferred Lab Coat Vendors.
- Purchase disposable lab coats -> disposable coats can be purchased from companies such as VWR. For environmental and cost reasons this is generally not the best solution. However, in cases where lab coats are rarely needed, or when a type of material not generally available in a reusable style is needed, this can be a viable option.

Q: How much does a lab coat service cost?

The total cost of your lab coat program will depend on multiple factors, including whether you rent or buy your coats, how often you have the laundry company wash dirty coats, the type of coat you want, the number of coats per person you have, and any add-ons you choose to have such as custom embroidery. Price lists for both Preferred Vendors can be found on the [Supplier Search](#) pages for each vendor. The preferred vendors can also work with you to generate an estimate of what your monthly cost would be for the various options you may choose.

Q: How do I find space for clean and dirty lab coats when my lab is already full?

There are many options available for storage of both clean and dirty lab coats, ranging from hooks on the wall combined with small waste storage bins up to large bays of lockers. The Preferred Vendors can look at your space and give you information on the various types of storage options that would be available based on the space limitations of your area and the lab coat needs of your researchers.

Q: How are laundry pickups/drop-offs scheduled?

The laundry companies work with the labs/departments to determine both the frequency of service needed and the specific schedule to be followed.

Q: How often should lab coats be washed?

Frequency of washing will depend on the type and amount of use. Routine washing is suggested to ensure cleanliness of coats. For heavy use a weekly wash schedule may be recommended; for less frequent use washing can be done biweekly or monthly.

Q: Can I have the laundry company come at a specified day/time each week?

Yes, you can arrange to have the laundry come at a convenient day/time each week.

Q: We have a small lab that doesn't need coats cleaned very often; how do we get clean coats without having to spend a lot of money?

There are many ways to limit the costs for small groups that need lab coats. The laundry companies can work with you to figure out an ideal setup. Some ways in which costs can be kept down include:

- Have less frequent pickup/return of coats. Both North Star and Cintas can schedule weekly, biweekly, or monthly services. In addition, Cintas offers a "call-as-needed" service.
- The standard recommendation is often to have 3 lab coats per person (one being worn, one being washed, and a backup). Labs can choose to have fewer coats per person (1.25-2), reducing the laundry cost.
- Several smaller labs can join together for a more centralized service. This can reduce the overall cost as well as save space by having a single location for coats shared by all labs involved in the service.

Q: What is the difference between individually assigned coats and "bulk" supply?

In a system with individually assigned coats, each person has their own coats that only they can wear. Often there are 3 coats assigned for each individual, so they have one "in use" coat, a backup clean coat, and a coat being laundered. In labs that require less frequent washing, the number of coats individually assigned can often be reduced to 2.

In a bulk supply system, the proportion of coats in each size should match the makeup of the lab but the coats are not assigned to individual people. This system can allow for cost savings in labs where less frequent washing is needed by allowing for less coats to be assigned per person and make it easier to have coats for visitors to use. However, this system can make tracking down lost/misplaced coats more difficult as it may be unclear who last used a given missing coat.

There are pros and cons to each system; the laundry companies can go over these details with you and help you determine what would work best for your situation.

Q: What if I don't like the lab coats offered by the Preferred Vendors?

You are not prohibited from purchasing coats from vendors that are not Preferred Vendors. However, you should ensure that the coats you get from other sources are made of appropriate materials for your hazards, fit properly, and are laundered by a company with experience cleaning lab coats. Note that both Preferred Vendors will launder coats owned by the customer regardless of where the coats originated from.

If you are unsure about what you should do, contact Procurement.

Resources

Q: Where can I go to get information on lab coats?

EHS

Main page for personal protective equipment – information on lab coats and other PPE, including selection, hazard assessments, etc.

<https://ehs.mit.edu/site/workplace-safety/personal-protective-equipment-ppe>

VPF

[Supplier Search](#) pages for each vendor.

Q: Who do I contact for more help?

EHS

Contact for help selecting the appropriate coats for the work you are conducting.

URL: <http://ehs.mit.edu>

Email: environment@mit.edu

Phone: 617-452-3477

Sourcing and Procurement

Contact for pricing and contract information, and assistance working with the laundry vendors.

URL: <http://vpf.mit.edu>

Jim Bagley - Senior Buyer

Email: jbagley@mit.edu

Phone: 1-617-324-8162

Cintas Corporation

Preferred Vendor for lab coat supply and laundry.

URL: www.cintas.com

Pascual Laguerra - Regional Manager - Higher Education

Email: laguerrap@cintas.com

Phone (cell): 978-621-6026

Fax: 844-712-2203

Chris Angelo, Senior Sales Executive

Email: AngeloC@Cintas.com

Phone (office): 978-244-6729

Phone (cell): 203-901-3423

Fax: 855-805-5909

North Star Rentals

Preferred Vendor for lab coat supply and laundry.

URL: <http://www.uniforms-linens.com>

Peter Villari

Email: Peterv@uniforms-linens.com

Phone (office): 617-623-1200

Phone (cell): 617-828-7971

Fax: 617-623-5625