

Tip of the Month

Shed Some Light on It!

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Proper lighting ergonomics should be considered as you design your quilting space. Eye fatigue, dry-eye, itchiness and inability to see your marked lines or seams as you guide your quilt under the needle are but just a few results of improper lighting. Proper lighting, however, makes a huge difference. The correct lighting allows you to see fine details, intricate stitching, and truer colors. By providing the best lighting ergonomics, you can reduce or eliminate eyestrain all together. We all wish we were lucky enough to have a studio awash in natural light, and if you do, I am envious. Reality says that most of us are in a lower level space, or a spare room with but one window. We have to rely upon artificial light sources while we work.

As you investigate lighting options for your studio, look at both overhead lighting and task lighting. First, overhead lights. A four-bulb fluorescent fixture is an excellent source of overhead light for machine quilting, especially when you install any of the bulbs that approximate natural light. Common household lighting contains more yellow light than natural outdoor lighting. The excess of yellow distorts the appearance of color and detail, leading to eye fatigue. The 'natural light' bulbs will enable you to see colors and textures as you would in sunlight, not washed out or color-changed by artificial lights. Note: Many people suffer from a condition known as 'S.A.D.-syndrome' (Seasonal Affective Disorder) as a result not having the benefit of enough hours of true sunlight. Full-spectrum daylight bulbs are also thought to improve your sense of well-being and can be especially helpful during the winter, when days are shorter.

No matter what type of ceiling fixture you use, whether the typical four-bulb or a single-bulb non-fluorescent type, be sure that you use non-glare lights and that you have sufficient wattage to do the job. A 50-watt bulb five feet above your head isn't going to provide adequate lighting. However, a 200 watt bulb only a foot over your head also may be too strong. Test the light reflection in your area and adjust it so that your eyes can comfortably work. Indirect lighting that reflects the light off the ceiling can produce shadow-free results. Some longarm manufacturers offer an optional lighting system attached to your longarm table. Investigate to see if this would work for your set-up. The cost is far outweighed by the benefits of good lighting.

Now let's talk about task lighting. Task lights are extremely helpful when you are machine quilting. You can encounter shadows on your work that general lighting cannot overcome. Most longarms have a task light built into the front of the machine to help alleviate shadows. But these lights cannot be too high in wattage because of the heat generated. Occasionally you will need more light directed on or around the needle area as you stitch.

There are several solutions to adding a light source. One popular method is to use a small, bendable light (also known as a 'snake light') attached to your machine for directing light to a specific area. Again, you want non-glare, full-spectrum light that is easy on the eyes and allows you to see the true color hues of fabrics and threads. Natural light is the best, of course, and if you have a window in your studio, position your machine table so that you receive good side lighting. Another light source can be positioned at the end of your machine, such as a photographer's lamp on a stand, with the light aimed sideways across your work. In any case, please be careful of the type of light bulb you use. Halogen lights, in particular, get very, very hot and should never be left on when you leave the area. I have heard of these lights actually burning a hole into quilts.