

Product Review: Rotary Cutters

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Once you discover the rotary cutter, you'll wonder how you ever lived without it. Seriously, this thing is like the sliced bread of sewing. I suppose, if push came to shove, you could use it to slice bread, but that's not my point. My point is that it is a wonderful tool, and can make the chore of cutting faster and more exact. When first confronted with its use, you may find it a bit intimidating. But following a few simple pointers will help you use this tool safely and easily.

There's a range of different models of rotary cutters on the market today. Each is essentially the same – they contain a round, razor-sharp blade that works much like a pizza cutter. You roll it over the surface of your fabric, and it cuts.



Sizing

Once you begin browsing for rotary cutters, you'll realize they come in a lot of styles and sizes. The most common sizes of blades are 18mm, 28mm, 45mm, and 60mm. The larger the blade size, the more fabric you can cut, and the faster you can cut it. If you know you'll be cutting yards and yards of fabric, you'll probably want to reach for a 60mm rotary cutter. An 18mm

rotary cutter is used mainly for making small cuts, or for cutting curves.

If you want to have one rotary cutter that will be sufficient for nearly all projects, your best bet is the 45mm. This is large enough to do a lot of cutting, but still manageable when you're trying to do more intricate work. Remember, each rotary cutter is created for a specific blade size. So when you are looking to purchase extra blades, be sure to get those that correspond to the size of your cutter.



Mats and Rulers

Mats and Rulers? Hey, wait a minute, I thought we were talking about cutters. Indeed we are. To really use your rotary cutter, you will need to invest in two other supplies at the same time. The first is a self-healing mat. These are made of a special substance that "heals" when you cut on it, so you don't create a gash through the mat each time you cut your fabric. They are available in a wide variety of sizes. For your primary mat, get one as large as your cutting surface and storage area will allow. You can't roll cutting mats like a poster, so keep in mind they need to be stored flat. If I were ever to put mine away (it just lives in my dining room) I would probably store it under the bed. The most common size is 36" x 24". If you can accommodate a larger mat, go for it. But really, 24" is the smallest you can go and still comfortably and accurately cut your fabric.



You'll also need a non-slip ruler to cut against. Don't try to use a regular yardstick when cutting fabric with a rotary cutter. Non-slip rulers contain a special feature that resists slipping, so you can safely cut your fabric. Sometimes this is a gripping lip that hangs over your mat, sometimes it's a gritty texture that holds the ruler in place, and sometimes the backing of the actual ruler allows it to stay in place when pressure is applied. These rulers are also especially helpful for accuracy in your cutting; they contain lines that indicate 30°, 45° and 60°, and have markings every 1/8". You'll want your primary ruler to be 6½" x 24" or 8½" x 24". It's also nice to have an additional square and/or smaller non-slip ruler.



Using the Cutter Correctly

All rotary cutters contain some sort of safety lock so the blade will not be exposed. It is essential to ALWAYS put the blade in the safe position when you are not using the rotary cutter. Get in the habit of locking it even when you are just putting it down to adjust your fabric. You want this step to become second nature to protect yourself or anyone in your sewing room from a potentially nasty cut. Every time I put mine down, my thumb automatically locks it – it's hard-wired into my fabric cutting regimen!



You hold a rotary cutter in much the same way you would a pizza cutter. Try to keep your hand, wrist and arm in a straight line. You may choose to put your index finger on the top of the cutter, in the way you might hold a pencil, or to use your whole fist to grip. This is a personal preference. When you are using the cutter, you want to push down firmly and consistently, but not with excessive force. The blade is incredibly sharp and will cut with a minimal amount of pressure. Some projects ask you to cut hundreds of pieces of fabric, so you don't want to set yourself up for fatigue early on.

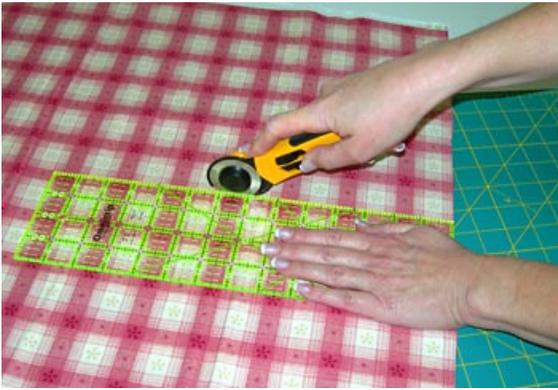
There are a number of styles that are designed to work for both right-handed or left-handed folks.



The other technique key to safe rotary cutter success is to always cut away from you. Never cut toward your body. You will be putting a good amount of muscle behind your cut, and you never know when the blade might slip. If that happens, you want to be sure the blade is headed for the wall and not your stomach!

As you make your cut, the blade of the rotary cutter should rest against the edge of your ruler. This will allow for accurate cuts, and will keep your cutter from wavering off target and cutting where you don't want it to. Within a few passes, you'll get a

feel for how much force you need to place on the side of cutter so it will stay in line with the ruler.



Want More Information?

For the next steps in cutting fabric with your rotary cutter, check out our tutorial [Quilting Basics: Tools, Cutting, and Piecing](#).

Rotary cutters are easily available online and at your local fabric store. If you'd like to read more about options and styles, the major manufacturers are:

[OLFA Corporation](#) (the first to introduce the tool)

[Fiskars](#)

[Gingher](#)

[Buying Guide](#)

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