Tension Concerns – Part 2

Because of how the knit stitch relates to the purl stitch, tension problems can occur as we alternate rows of knitting and purling in Stockinette stitch. Also, an uneven fabric can be caused by how the yarn and needles are held. As discussed in Part 1, whether we knit English or Continental, tension must be placed on the working yarn when forming knit and purl stitches. Tension solutions in this article can be used with both methods.

How to Obtain an Even Fabric

If you know that your purl stitches are looser than your knit stitches, one method of obtaining an even stockinette fabric is to avoid the purl stitch altogether and only use the knit stitch perhaps by only doing circular knitting. This is not always possible, however. Unless you are knitting a garment with steeks, you will need to change from circular to flat knitting at some point. This will most likely occur at the armhole shaping and neck shaping where the back and front of the garment must be knit separately. When converting from circular knitting to flat knitting, you may see a tension change in the fabric because you are no longer executing only the knit stitch.

Because the purl stitch is the culprit for most knitters, just being aware as you purl can help. Tightening up the purl stitches may be a simple solution. Or if the problem stems from too loosely knitted stitches, the knit stitches may need to be tightened. If you put a marker or pin through the knit stitch for a few rows of your work, you will be able to diagnose which stitch is causing the problem and then you will know how to remedy the situation. It takes a bit of practice and mindfulness to compensate naturally.

Some knitters use two different needle sizes for knitting and purling to help achieve an even stockinette fabric. Because the purl stitches are usually the problem, a smaller size needle is used when purling. If your knit stitches are looser, use the smaller needle for the knit rows. Usually a change of one size will work, but you can experiment with various sizes until you are satisfied with the results.

Composition of the needle, and a combination of yarn and needle type can affect tension. Nickel-plated needles with a slippery yarn can result in a looser, uneven fabric. However, a slippery yarn with bamboo or plastic needles may work fine, as the yarn will not move as easily along this type of needle.

If looser purl stitches are the problem, the Combination method of knitting can help to achieve an even stockinette fabric. In this technique the purl stitches are placed on the right needle in the opposite direction. In other words, the resultant stitch from the Combination method is seated the opposite way on the needle when compared to the stitch formed by the traditional method. This method of purling allows for less yarn to be used and the resultant purl stitches are then smaller. Consequently, when knitting the following row, the stitches must be knit through the back loop to avoid twisted stitches.

Edge Stitches

One of the main causes of uneven edge stitches in stockinette are the 1-3 stitches that neighbor the selvage stitches. This is most noticeable on the left side with too tight stitches in one row and too loose stitches in the next. This unevenness occurs from how the previous row was worked. As we knit (or purl) across a row, we place the working needle into the stitch that is on the non-working needle (the stitches of the previous row). We tend to stretch those stitches with the working needle as we form the new row stitches. The very slight stretching of these stitches will result in a slack in the yarn in the row below. That extra yarn is then carried across the row. We do not notice this slack in the yarn until the end of the row where the last 1-3 stitches of the row are affected. In other words, the extra yarn cannot be carried up to the next row so the stitches of the row below the last worked row become a little larger. To fix this problem, knit or purl the first 3-4 stitches of every row tighter, or use the Combination purl method for the purl row. The stitches that are too loose will become normal-sized when paired with the tighter-knit stitches at the beginning of the next row and vice versa.

If both the right and left edges are stretched, the problem may be that both knit and purl...
edge stitches are loose. If that is the case, the above suggestions can be used on both selvedges in both the knit and purl stitches. Again, this may take a bit of practice and mindfulness, but the result will be even edges!

If you have minimal tension concerns or, if you have no significant edge stitch problems, do not make the assumption that always pulling the yarn tighter when beginning a row will make your knitting tension more even. All that does is pull the yarn from the row below making those stitches even smaller.

**Ribbing, Cables and Pattern Stitches**

All of the above solutions to tension problems can be used with ribbing, cables, and pattern stitches that alternate between knit and purl stitches. Probably the most useful tip is to remember to snug the yarn between the knit and purl stitches so that the same amount of yarn is used for both the knit stitch and the purl stitch. This will result in even stitches.

Now that you know how to obtain an even fabric as you knit, is there a way to fix loose, large, or stretched stitches “after the fact”? Of course there is. I will tell you about those techniques in the next article of this series.

**References**


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