Wintertime means wool clothing, heavyweight jackets and those heavy comforters on the bed. Many of us spend a mint on dry cleaning these items. But if you’ve taken anything to the dry cleaners recently, you know it can be quite expensive.

Clothing is a major expenditure and you need to protect that investment. If it needs to be cleaned, the most harmful thing you can do is to ignore it. Clothing and household items that are kept clean and carefully stored will last.

Proctor and Gamble estimates that women spend around $1,500 a year on dry cleaning. This number can be trimmed down with a few simple steps.

Read the labels before you purchase garments. If it is labeled dry clean only, walk on by. My husband took a jacket to the cleaners and found that he had spent more on the cleaning than replacing the jacket. It might have been smarter for him to purchase a jacket that didn’t have to be dry cleaned.

Pay attention to the exact wording on the label. There is a difference between the labels “dry clean” and “dry clean only.” If the label says “dry clean,” it is a suggestion — the fibers may be washable. If it says “dry clean only,” the fiber it is made from must be dry cleaned. Learn which fibers are washable and which must be dry cleaned.

Don’t take washable clothing to the dry cleaners. Proctor and Gamble says that 65 percent of the items that come to the cleaner are actually washable. It may cost as much as $5 to dry clean a shirt, but it can be washed for a few cents and ironed with a few minutes of your time. In addition, dry-cleaning fluids destroy washable fabrics. Some garments turn yellow with repeated treatments of dry-cleaning fluids or if the cleaning fluid isn’t changed often enough.
Many fibers are hand-washable. Cashmere, wool, silk and cotton are washable by hand. Leather and velvet should always be sent to the cleaners.

If you aren’t sure whether the fabric is colorfast, use the cotton swab method. Dampen a swab and rub it on a hidden area of the garment such as the hem or a seam. If the color lifts, take it to the cleaners rather trying to clean it yourself.

Now for that comforter. Most of us send them to the cleaners because our washers aren’t large enough to accommodate the bulk of the item. Take those bulky items to the laundromat and use the large size machines. Not only will the item come out better, you will save money.

Use home cleaning kits to freshen instead of cleaning. Take a look at the items and see whether they are actually dirty, or if they just need an airing. I wear lots of wool jackets. They rarely get dirty, but sometimes need to be aired out. Use one of the commercial kits for dry cleaning and freshen them up at a much cheaper price. These kits aren’t designed to clean garment, only to freshen and air out garments.

Take care of your clothes. This is the major lesson in keeping down your cleaning costs. When you wear a garment, hang it up. It will air out and the wrinkles won’t set. Garments wear out when they are repeatedly washed or dry cleaned. Throwing them in the floor on in a heap will require some type of treatment to get them ready to wear again. Just hang up clothes at the end of the day and you won’t need to clean them as often.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.