



How to Make Char Cloth

What is Char Cloth?

Char cloth is short for “charred cloth.” Char cloth can be used to help make a fire in a survival situation in combination with ferro rods, flint and steel, or magnifying glass to help get a tinder bundle to burst into flame. The good news is that it is extremely easy to make!

What you will need:

- * 100% cotton fabric (an old T-shirt works great)
- * Scissors
- * A metal can– paint stores sell pint size, unused cans. Altoid or mint cans can be used, but may be too small if you want to make a supply for a group.
- * A nail and hammer
- * A fire

Optional:

- * A tinder bundle and magnifying glass (or spark-making tool such as flint and steel) if you want to immediately test your char cloth

The process:

1. Poke a hole with a nail in the lid of your metal container



2. Cut your cotton cloth into small squares and place in your metal can. Don't fill more than 2/3 of your container, otherwise some of your charcoal will burn unevenly.



3. Place the lid on the can and put it into your fire. Surround the can with hot coals or fire, or if the can is on the edge of the fire, occasionally rotate the can.
4. The can will soon emit smoke out of the small hole in the lid. Don't worry if this smoke occasionally catches on fire. When the smoke stops spewing from the can, you are done. This typically takes only 15-30 minutes depending on how hot your fire is.



5. Remove the can from the fire. Let the can cool (usually takes only a few minutes), then, pry the lid off and check your char cloth. If it is all black, you are done! If there are uncooked, brown sections of cloth, put the lid back on and put the can back in the fire for 5-10 minutes, then check the can again to see if it is done.



Testing your char cloth (optional)

With a tinder bundle ready, grab a magnifying glass and focus a pinpoint of sunlight on a piece of your char cloth. It should soon catch and start glowing and growing around the edge of the light beam. As soon as this happens, place your char cloth into your tinder bundle and blow into flame. If it is a cloudy day, and you have a ferro rod or flint and steel, try to get a spark to land on the char cloth to make a glowing/growing section.



Safety

Char cloth by itself doesn't typically burst into flame, but once a spark catches on it, it grows very quickly in size and soon the entire cloth will be a spent, burnt piece of fabric. For this reason, if you are planning to make fire, you need to be ready to move fairly quickly by placing your char cloth into your tinder bundle (within a minute or two of getting a spark to land and grow on your cloth). Transferring a glowing char cloth to a tinder bundle may require some dexterity to avoid burns. You can also use small twigs as tweezers to transfer a hot char cloth to a tinder bundle. An alternative is to begin with the char cloth in your tinder bundle. However if working with a group of youth, we don't recommend giving every youth a tinder bundle to work with simultaneously, otherwise you will be possibly managing multiple tinder bundles bursting into flame at the same time. With any fire, it is a good idea to have some water on hand to douse the flames when done or for dunking a finger if one gets a minor burn. Be aware of wind in a dry landscape, as glowing char cloths can easily blow away if not tended carefully.

Youth/group teaching tips

Have some preprepared char cloth before you begin. Make the new char cloth with your group. Assemble the fire with your group and gather a tinder bundle together. You can tease apart pieces of jute twine if it is too rainy for dry local tinder. Demonstrate how to light your fire (that you will use to make char cloth with) using your preprepared char cloth (+ magnifying glass, ferro rod, flint and steel etc.). Once the fire is lit, put your can of new cloth into the fire to make more char cloth. Have someone tend/watch the fire while you facilitate teaching the kids how to use char cloth to make fire.

Give each student (or group of students) a piece of char cloth and a magnifying glass, or ferro rod/flint and steel. When they get the char cloth to catch and start glowing and growing, have them call you (the instructor) over. Place their cloth into a tinder bundle that you are holding. Have the student blow the tinder bundle into flame while you hold it. Once lit, you can drop the flaming bundle into a fire, water, or onto the ground (and stomp it out).

If working with a group, there will be a lot of enthusiasm to do this again. If you collect and dry a polypore fungus (they grow everywhere on decomposing/dying trees), you can place several char cloth onto the fungus and let the dried fungus gradually turn into a giant coal. When you are ready, after everyone has had a chance to try to make char cloth, you can then use the glowing fungus to make your fire.