

# Thermoplastics: The Strongest Choice for 3D Printing

When Material Stability And  
Long-Term Performance  
Is Paramount



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The majority of today's consumer products — and many commercial ones — are composed of thermoplastics. When designing a new product, engineers can best predict its end performance by prototyping with a material as similar to the final product as possible. That's why 3D printing with thermoplastics is so widely practiced. Engineers have the option of making parts with the most commonly used thermoplastics, such as ABS, polycarbonate, a variety of blends, as well as engineered thermoplastics for aerospace, medical, automotive, electronic and other specialty applications. When using 3D printing for the production of finished goods, using a thermoplastic is all the more important, and it may be the only choice for many applications.

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Materials characterize manufacturing processes. In turn, manufacturing processes influence the material properties of the final product. Additive manufacturing is no different. The technologies are identified by the materials they use, and the quality of the output is controlled by the processing methods.

Additive manufacturing uses a layer-based process to convert computer models into plastic parts. Direct from computer-aided design (CAD) files, automated machines add layer after layer of material, which makes very complex parts easy to produce.

[The Stratasys FDM® process](#) uses industrial-grade thermoplastics including some high-performance engineered materials. These thermoplastics are made from the same raw

stock as injection molding materials. They're well-suited for applications ranging from concept modeling through product development and manufacturing. Similar to molded parts, there are a variety of material options, each with unique characteristics designed to meet the application needs.

The following sections of this white paper highlight FDM additive manufacturing thermoplastics, typical applications and how to choose the right material to suit your needs.

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## Selecting a Thermoplastic

For production of finished goods, there are no shortcuts. Material stability and durable performance is key. So, carefully consider the mechanical, thermal, electrical and chemical properties and any changes that result from aging or environmental exposure. However, because parts created with an FDM machine share many of the characteristics of the molded thermoplastics, you can leverage what you already know.

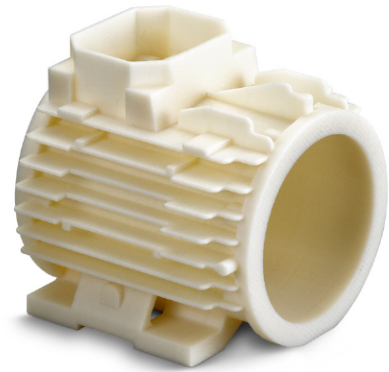
For all other applications, including functional prototypes, patterns, tooling and manufacturing aids, the selection process is much simpler. The key is understanding the characteristics that make each FDM material unique. Consider the following qualities:

- Material characteristics
- FDM machine availability
- Support material type
- Color

To pick the right material, seek the best combination of these material traits while placing priorities where they belong. As you review the material options, you may find the choice is simple because of a critical performance standard (e.g., chemical inertness) or personal preference (e.g., no-touch post processing).

All FDM materials have a lot in common. Each material is similar in terms of loading and building parts, office compatibility, and is safe enough to handle with no protective gear. Also, parts produced by each material are dimensionally stable and durable enough for demanding applications.

## ABS



ABS, one of most commonly used thermoplastics, has been the foundation for FDM for many years. Measured by annual consumption, it is the most widely used material in FDM machines. It is so widely used that it can be labeled general purpose, which is accurate but misleading. The ABS materials are an excellent choice for models, prototypes, patterns, tools and end-use parts. Forty to seventy percent stronger than the FDM materials of just a few years ago, today's thermoplastics for FDM machines offer greater tensile, impact and flexural strength.

## ABS-M30



[The ABS-M30™ plastic formulation](#) is the plastic commonly used in the FDM process, and is specific to the Fortus™ line of production 3D printers. This material formulation is also known as [ABSplus™](#) for the [uPrint SE Plus™ 3D Printer](#).

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In raw filament form, these are identical materials with equal mechanical properties. However, as you review the data sheets for *ABSplus* and ABS-M30, you may be surprised to see a difference in finished part material properties. As with molded parts, processing makes a difference. Developed for manufacturing applications, Fortus® 3D Printers have advanced hardware and software controls that process the materials differently. By doing so, the material characteristics achievable from ABS-M30 are improved. While *ABSplus* produces tough parts, ABS-M30 is generally stronger in all categories.

Both materials will produce parts that are stable, strong and durable. Both come in a range of colors that include white, black, red, blue, green, fluorescent yellow and more.

Another common quality that makes these two materials the workhorses of FDM is that they are easy to finish. As with most additive manufacturing processes, FDM machines use a sacrificial support structure to build the part, but the ABS materials have something few others do: no-touch support removal. A soluble support material eliminates manual labor. Parts are placed in a tank and the supports are dissolved away.

The surface finish of *ABSplus* and ABS-M30 parts is more than adequate for concept modeling, functional prototyping and creating manufacturing tools. If the application is for master patterns, marketing models or finished goods, and the user wants a surface finish similar to that of injection molding, FDM has an optional hands-free smoothing process in the form of the Finishing Touch® Smoothing Station that can smooth parts in under a minute.

## ABS-ESD7



[ABS-ESD7™](#) is Stratasys' electrostatic dissipative material available for FDM. This material prevents a buildup of static electricity, so it's ideal for applications where a static charge can damage products, impair performance or cause an explosion. For these reasons, ABS-ESD7 is well-suited for carriers and organizers for electrical components, fixtures for electronic component assembly and production line and conveyor parts. Other applications include product design and validation for electronic product enclosures, electronics packaging materials and powder or mist conveying or dispensing.

ABS-ESD7 also eliminates another common static electricity problem: the attraction and buildup of particulate, such as dust or powders, which can degrade product performance. ABS-ESD7 also avoids attracting atomized liquid so it's beneficial for medicine inhalers that must deliver the entire drug dose to the patient and not leave mist clinging to the inhaler's internal surfaces. All mechanical properties of ABS-ESD7 are within five percent of the ratings for ABS-M30.

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## ABS-M30i

Medical, pharmaceutical and food handling equipment have stringent regulations to protect consumers from illness and disease. Regulations include standards such as ISO 10993 and



USP Class VI, which classify a material as biocompatible. [ABS-M30i™](#) meets these criteria so it can be used for products that come in contact with skin, food and medications.

ABS-M30i blends strength with sterilization capability – another criterion for products that come in contact with our bodies and the things we ingest. ABS-M30i can be sterilized using either gamma radiation or ethylene oxide (Eta) sterilization methods.

## ABSi



The advantage of ABSi™ is its translucence. Although it has good mechanical properties, it excels in lighting applications. Its red, amber and clear color options make it a popular material for functional evaluation of light lenses and automotive lighting. It is also useful for monitoring material flow in applications that process or transfer material in powder or bulk solid form.

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## ASA



An excellent general-purpose thermoplastic is [ASA \(acrylonitrile styrene acrylate\)](#). ASA has improved mechanical properties versus ABS, and one important distinction: UV stability. ASA builds UV-stable parts that won't degrade with prolonged exposure to sunlight, plus it offers some of the best aesthetics of any FDM thermoplastic. Easy to use and reliable, ASA is ideal for automotive parts, sporting goods, outdoor functional prototyping and end-use parts for outdoor infrastructure and commercial use, like electrical housings. ASA's excellent mechanical properties and aesthetics are also great for general-purpose prototyping. It also offers 10 color choices, more than any other FDM material.

## PC (Polycarbonate)

Stratasys is serious about production applications, so it doesn't ignore the most widely used industrial thermoplastic, polycarbonate (PC). PC is available on all Fortus 3D printers, and when parts come off these machines, they are accurate, stable and very durable.

PC has excellent mechanical properties and heat resistance. It has the second highest tensile strength of all FDM materials and a high heat deflection temperature of 280 °F (138 °C). This



is a serious material for tough applications: functional testing, tooling or production.

## PC-ABS



There's a good reason for the blend of polycarbonate and ABS. It gives the most desirable properties of both PC and ABS materials. It has the superior mechanical properties and heat resistance of PC, including one of the highest impact strength ratings of all the FDM materials.

Meanwhile, it has good flexural strength, feature definition and surface appeal of ABS. Like all versions of ABS for FDM, [PC-ABS](#) offers the no-touch finishing option with soluble supports.

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## PC-ISO™

Like ABS-M30i, [PC-ISO](#) is a biocompatible (ISO 10993 and USP Class VI) material, which makes it the other FDM alternative for medical, pharmaceutical and food packaging industries.



Another trait shared between them is that it is sterilizable using gamma radiation or ethylene oxide (Eta) methods.

Characteristics that distinguish PC-ISO are its higher tensile and flexural strength, and its higher heat deflection temperature. In these categories, its values are 33% to 59% higher than those of ABS-M30i.

## PLA

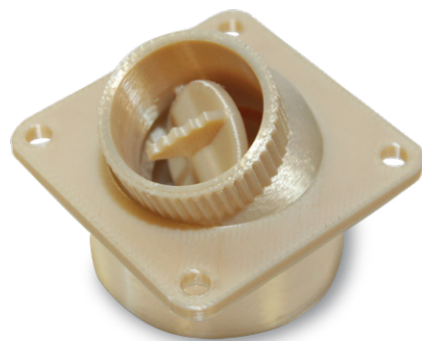
PLA is a plastic material offered as a low-cost option for fast-draft part iterations in translucent or opaque colors. It is made primarily from organic, renewable compounds and is viewed as an environmentally friendlier plastic option than inorganic plastics. PLA offers good tensile strength, a higher stiffness than ABS and strength comparable to polycarbonate. Its low melting point and HDT mean less heat and power are needed for modeling. PLA works well for quick concept verification and design validation. Ideal applications include early



concept modeling, fast prototyping and metal part casting.

## ULTEM™ 9085 Resin

One of three high-performance engineered



thermoplastic materials available for FDM, [ULTEM 9085 resin](#) is found in many aircraft and aerospace products. ULTEM 9085 resin is FST rated, which means it satisfies flame, smoke and toxicity standards. When processed in a Fortus system, the material's FST characteristics are unchanged. So, transportation companies that must adhere to stringent requirements often demand ULTEM 9085 resin. Also available in

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certified grade, this option offers full production traceability in compliance with rigorous aerospace certification requirements. If your application doesn't require FST rating, don't overlook this material. You will still want to consider ULTEM 9085 resin for its strength, durability and resistance to heat and chemicals. It is a tough material that can take a beating.

Of the 15 FDM materials, ULTEM 9085 resin has well-rounded thermal, mechanical and chemical properties that make it superior in most categories. In terms of material sales for FDM use, it is the fastest growing.

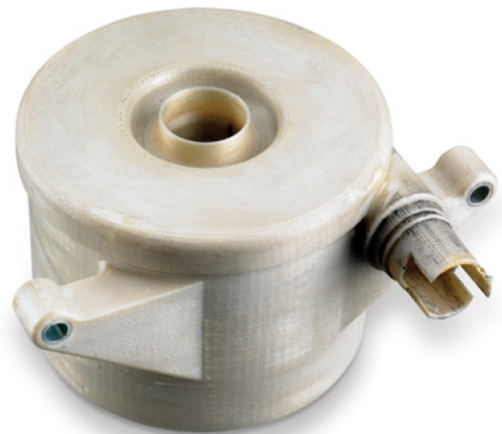
## ULTEM 1010 Resin



[ULTEM 1010 resin](#) is another high-performance FDM thermoplastic and offers excellent strength and thermal stability. With the lowest coefficient of thermal expansion of any FDM material, ULTEM 1010 resin is perfect for many industrial tooling applications and other parts that require the unique combination of strength and thermal stability. ULTEM 1010 resin's ability to withstand steam autoclaving and its food-contact (NSF 51) and bio-compatibility (ISO 10993) certifications make it perfect for specialized applications including food-production tools and custom

medical devices. The first Stratasys material approved for food contact, ULTEM 1010 resin also offers the highest heat resistance, chemical resistance and tensile strength of any FDM thermoplastic. It's ideal for everything from aerospace applications to under-the-hood automotive applications to composite tooling.

## PPSF/PPSU Polyphenylsulfone



The first high-performance engineered thermoplastic available for FDM was [PPSF](#) (also called [PPSU](#)). This super material was added for under-the-hood and other advanced applications, where other plastics can succumb to heat and chemical attack. PPSF has excellent heat resistance (372 °F/189 °C heat deflection temperature) and chemical resistance. It is mechanically superior to other FDM materials outside the high-performance materials. PPSF is resistant to oils, gasoline, chemicals and acids.

Like ABSi and ABS-M30i, PPSF is sterilizable. But because of its temperature and chemical resistance, you can use other sterilization methods, such as steam autoclave, plasma, chemical and radiation sterilization.



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## FDM Nylon 12



[FDM Nylon 12](#) is the first material in Stratasys' new family of nylon offerings. Nylon 12 complements the current portfolio of FDM materials and enables new applications requiring repetitive snap fits, high fatigue resistance, strong chemical resistance and press (friction) fit inserts. Primarily used in aerospace, automotive and consumer goods industries, nylon 12 offers unparalleled toughness and a simple, clean process that's free of powders. FDM Nylon 12 parts exhibit 100 to 300 percent better elongation at break and superior fatigue resistance over any other additive manufacturing technology.

## FDM Nylon 12CF



[FDM Nylon 12CF™](#) is a carbon-filled thermoplastic with excellent structural characteristics. The material is comprised of a blend of Nylon 12 resin and chopped carbon fiber, at a loading of 35% by weight. This combination produces one of the strongest thermoplastics in the FDM material portfolio. It has the highest flexural strength of any FDM thermoplastic, resulting in the highest stiffness-to-weight ratio. Appropriate uses include strong but lightweight tooling applications and functional prototypes for aerospace, automotive, industrial and recreational manufacturing.

## FDM Nylon 6

[FDM Nylon 6™](#) combines strength and toughness superior to other thermoplastics for applications that require strong, customized parts and tooling that lasts longer and can withstand rigorous functional testing.

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Engineered with nylon 6, a popular thermoplastic for manufacturing, this material works with the [Fortus 900mc™](#) to produce durable parts with a clean finish and high break resistance. FDM Nylon 6 is ideal for product manufacturers and development engineers in automotive, aerospace, consumer goods and industrial manufacturing.

## FDM TPU 92A Elastomer

[FDM® TPU 92A](#) is a thermoplastic polyurethane that brings the significant benefits of elastomers to FDM 3D printing. Available on the F123 Series 3D Printers, FDM TPU 92A lets manufacturers quickly prototype elastomer parts with superior functionality over competitive technologies.

The material exhibits flexibility and stretch combined with abrasion and tear resistance, creating a whole new realm of uses that rigid plastics simply can't meet. Typical applications involve prototyping of flexible hoses, air ducts and seals, protection covers, and vibration dampeners. These use cases have broad application across many industries and are of particular interest in the transportation industry.

FDM TPU 92A lets engineers and designers easily and quickly produce large, complex, accurate elastomer parts. Stratasys-exclusive



soluble support material makes it possible to create tubes, ducts and intricate designs because the support material is easily dissolved in a hands-free solution.

## Antero 800NA



[Antero™ 800NA](#) is the first Stratasys PEKK-based FDM thermoplastic. It possesses excellent mechanical properties that include high strength, high heat resistance, toughness and wear-resistance. These superior qualities make it a lighter alternative to heavier materials like aluminum and steel.

Resistance to jet fuel, oil and hydraulic fluid make this material particularly suitable for aerospace applications. Antero 800NA aircraft parts installed in close proximity to these fluids won't degrade and provide the added benefit of lighter weight. Spacecraft need materials with

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very low emissivity to avoid contamination of optical instruments. Antero 800NA meets this requirement with very low offgassing properties.

An added benefit is the cost savings inherent with additive manufacturing. Machining PEKK-based parts produces waste whereas FDM technology uses material only where it's needed. For a costly material like PEKK, this can add up to significant savings. Antero 800NA is available on the [Fortus 450mc](#) and F900 Printers.

## ST-130



The only FDM model material designed and tested specifically for composite tooling applications, [ST-130](#) helps build complex, hollow structures in one seam-free piece through sacrificial tooling.

ST-130 offers more control over interior accuracy and surface finish of hollow composite parts without time-consuming mold-making processes, interior wrinkles from clamshell tooling or the extra bonding and finishing steps needed in multi-piece construction.

ST-130 support material dissolves easily, producing lightweight, strong, seamless composite parts with complex geometries.

Material	Key Characteristics
ABS-M30, ABS <i>plus</i>	Versatile, tough
ABS-ESD7	Electrostatic discharge resistant
ABS-M30i	Biocompatible
ABSi	Translucent
ASA	UV stable
PC	Strong (tension)
PC-ABS	Strong (impact)
PC-ISO	Biocompatible
PLA	Bioplastic used for fast-draft printing
ST-130	Designed for sacrificial tooling
ULTEM 9085 Resin	Mechanically well-rounded. FST certification. ULTEM 9085 resin Aerospace available.
ULTEM1010 Resin	Food-safety and biocompatibility certification Highest heat resistance
PPSF	Resistant (thermal/chemical)
FDM Nylon 12	Strong (high fatigue resistance)
FDM Nylon 12CF	Highest flexural strength Highest stiffness-to-weight ratio
FDM Nylon 6	Strong (impact), tough (high fatigue resistance)
Antero 800NA	Chemical and wear resistant, low outgassing
FDM TPU 92A	High resilience and elongation

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## CONCLUSION

The 18 FDM materials share many characteristics that make them well-suited for in-office modeling as well as low-volume manufacturing. Yet, each has unique properties that distinguish them from one another. Their unique properties include transparency, biocompatibility, FST certification, chemical resistance, thermal resistance and strength, and it is these properties that make material selection a fairly simple task.

In manufacturing, materials define the process. Additive manufacturing with FDM offers a selection of thermoplastic materials for functional use, capable of a broad range of applications.

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