

CHOOSING A BED

They say we spend one third of our lives in bed, so a comfortable one is obviously essential. Yet if you've been shopping for one lately, there's a bewildering choice. There's orthopedic, posturepedic, posture slat, physiotherapy, chiropractic, inner spring, latex, futon and more. So this is my attempt to help you make the best decision for you.

ONE SIMPLE RULE

No matter what bed type you buy – lie down in your most common sleeping position and have someone look at your spine and overall posture. If you're on your side – your head, neck and low back should line up straight. Take your regular pillow with you if possible – check that it suits the bed and holds your neck in alignment. You may find that a new bed with your old pillows may not work, so budget for new pillows as well! If you're a back sleeper your body shouldn't sag in the middle so you end up banana shape. Ensure your pillow doesn't lift your head up too high. The bed will almost certainly feel uncomfortable if the pillow is the wrong height.



SHOPPING BY PRICE

Cheap beds: (<\$1000) Use low quality springs, fibres and fabrics that often attract dust mites, and are more likely to hold water (a damp bed is obviously not healthy). They won't last long, or suit heavy people. So this category is best suited for short term or low use spare bed.

Medium Price:(\$1000-\$2500) Start to use higher tensile springs which hold shape and provide better support..

Expect higher quality padding materials which last longer, can be dust mite resistant, and have lower tendency to hold water. You'll find a vast range of spring arrangement which each manufacturer considers better. Ultimately you need to decide on comfort.

Premium Price: (\$2500-\$5000+) Once you start spending big money, you end up paying for luxury top padding, and often don't gain anything in bed quality or support. The one exception to this would be 100% latex rubber beds which are excellent beds but are also expensive, more on them later.

WATER BEDS

These have never really been a great idea since there is no even distribution of weight. Quite simply the heaviest part of your body will sink far lower so that no matter what position you lie, your spine will not be in neutral. Sleeping on a water bed will greatly reduce the effectiveness of your chiropractic care. My best advice would be never buy one, or get rid of it if you have one.

THE BASE

Pick from spring, posture slat, futon or solid base (no air gaps). The latter is cheap and is not recommended for your every-day bed as it stops the bed from breathing and mould will be a problem. Posture slat and futon bases are the support structures for the matching mattress so spend good money if this is your bed style of choice. Slat beds have divisions through the middle so there's no roll-together, an important factor to reduce partner disturbance, and most



have the option of pre-tension kits which stiffen the slats and provide more support for heavier sleepers (over 90kg). A simple wooden futon will sag over time so the life of the bed may be shorter, and unlike slat beds, individual slats aren't as easily replaceable. Traditional spring (or ensemble) bases will extend the life of a spring mattress, but they don't provide a lot of direct support. Strong side walls are useful so the entire mattress width is supported.

Generally it's better to buy a complete ensemble bed rather than recycling an old base. In the medium and high price bracket you will probably find that the bed will perform better and last longer with its matching base.

SLAT BED MATTRESSES

Perhaps surprisingly, the function here is primarily comfort, since it's the slats that support. The more you spend, generally the better quality and the longer it will last. Foam rubber is the cheapest option, but holds a lot of water and also compresses over time. Latex rubber holds very little water and is therefore more hygienic. It is very resilient and will last for a long time (20 years or more). It's also the most expensive. Other products used should be hard wearing and not hold water. Most materials are treated to resist mould and dust mites to minimize allergy problems. Slat mattresses with springs have similar variety of design to normal mattresses, but remember the springs are providing comfort more than support so their design is somewhat less important than in spring mattresses.

SPRING / ENSEMBLE MATTRESS

This has to be the most complex decision process as there are as many variations as there are components.

The coils / springs

More springs means greater spread of your body weight so fewer pressure points, and they should also last longer. Also find out how many twists to each spring, 5 is stiffer, 6 softer. The heating / manufacturing system for each spring also affects its longevity. Ones that have a 'memory' and return to shape will obviously cost more but last longer.

Individual or long-run springs

The better beds use individual springs, you'll have a more comfortable sleep. Some even come in their own pocket to reduce partner disturbance. Conversely a single wire twisted into a multi-spring length is more likely to transmit movement around the bed and disrupt your sleep, so go for individual springs if you can. If price prevents you from doing this, make sure they run head-to-toe to minimise partner disturbance.

The centre zone

It's imperative, pick a bed with a high concentration of springs in the centre zone. This is where most of your weight lies and extra support is needed to stop your body from sagging. It is this area where water beds fail miserably in supporting your spine. Different manufacturers have various theories as to what works best here, ultimately decide on comfort.

Side walls

This is how to get value for money. If there is added support to the side walls of the mattress, then they say you'll have about 20% more sleeping area than without. The support enables you to sleep right to the side without feeling like you're rolling off. Different manufacturers use different methods to achieve side-wall support, lie on the edge and fully relax. How comfortable is it?

Construction material

This includes all the internal padding, protection and exterior wrapping. Ask for details as to what's used, and look at a sample cut-away mattress. Avoid products that hold water, and look for treatment processes that minimise dust mite and mould formation.

The comfort layers

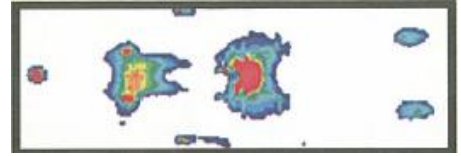
Here's where much confusion lies. The softness (or firmness) of your mattress is somewhat unrelated to the support that it gives. The chiropractic endorsed 'King Koil' beds for example have an identical spring mattress across the range. The difference in softness is affected by your choice of comfort layers on top. You get exactly the same support for \$1000 as for nearly \$3000, but a vast difference in plushness.

THE PURE LATEX BED

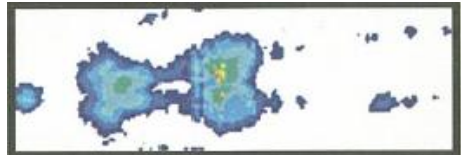
This is what I sleep on – but it wasn't cheap (over \$4000). Although the bed *feels* soft, it's actually very supportive. When the body is subjected to more than 32lbs pressure, capillary blood flow gets restricted, and you move to relieve pressure. Innerspring mattresses average more than 100lbs pressure. Good latex beds have less than 30lbs. This is because they spread the pressure out across the body. Since most mattresses are quite firm you tend to lie on rather than be surrounded by the mattress. The pressure diagrams below show how with a full latex bed there are virtually no high pressure spots compared with a regular bed. With no pressure spots you're less likely to get uncomfortable in bed, less likely to toss and turn, and of course have a great night sleep. Even a thin layer of latex could be worthwhile in other bed styles in achieving some of this degree of comfort. As a natural product there is very low dust mite problems with latex, it holds very little water and lasts a long time. A new product called memory foam seems to have similar support qualities but I'm not sure of the longevity. Both types do have a tendency to be warmer than a traditional mattress however so keep

this in mind.

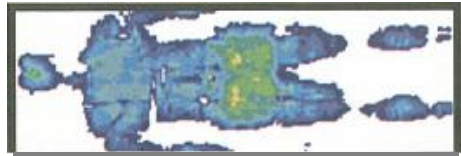
High pressure spots in a spring bed:



Pressure spots with 5cm latex



Pressure spots full latex mattress



SO TO SUMMARISE:

1. Decide on how much you can afford
2. Decide on the style of bed
3. Pay all your attention initially to the spring / support structure
4. Ask about the fabrics, fibres and foams used
5. Then consider comfort layers

THE DECISION

Bed shopping is a slightly embarrassing but important event – yet everyone in the shop is in the same boat, so just relax and take your time. Ultimately, the bed must be both supportive and comfortable. A good retailer may let you try the bed out at home for a few days, or at least have a return policy so always ask for this information. Find out about the construction of the bed using these suggestions to make your own decision. A bed will soften over time so it makes some sense to go for a slightly firmer bed, but you still need to be comfortable! Once you've made your purchase, remember to look after it well. This includes turning the mattress as recommended, allowing fresh air to circulate around it every so often, and vacuum it regularly to remove dust mites.