

The Joyful Sleeper

The right mattress is the backbone of better slumber, but it's a buyer's jungle out there

M.L. BREAM



It took Toronto mother Kay Jackson, 54, three tries over a decade to find the right mattress. The first one, a coil mattress she had for seven years, was too hard. "I felt like I'd been beaten up when I got out of bed in the morning," she says. The replacement model, a cushy pillow-top, was too soft. "I ended up with lower back pain, and I felt exhausted when I got up." Unable to afford a new mattress, she suffered with it for two more years. When she couldn't take the backaches anymore, she purchased a new one. Like Goldilocks, on the third try she got it just right. Her current mattress is a medium-firm foam model, which leaves her feeling great when she wakes up. "I have no aches and pains. I feel rested," says Kay.

It is possible to avoid the expensive mistakes Kay made. But that's not to say buying a sleep surface is straightforward. The sheer variety of products, and the claims associated with them, can make this pricey purchase a major challenge. You'll find yourself in a maze of mattresses made of materials ranging from

traditional coiled inner springs to so-called specialty materials, such as air, water, gel, cotton, memory foam, natural latex foam rubber — and every conceivable combination of the foregoing. And that's just for the mattress base. With the invention of the pillow-top, a pad of variable thickness that covers the base, the options are multiplied further.

WHERE TO START

You've likely heard that firm mattresses are better for your back. After all, for millennia humans

have crashed on the unyielding ground — atop thin layers of grass, straw, boughs and skins. And around the world, millions still sleep on hard surfaces ranging from mats and pallets to cotton-batting-filled Japanese futons. And here at home, countless ads allege that extra-firm mattresses are better for your back and musculoskeletal system.

But spine specialist Dr. Paul Bishop, an associate professor in the department of orthopaedics at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, says the claims are not supported by science. "I know

of no studies showing that firm mattresses are better for your back," he says.

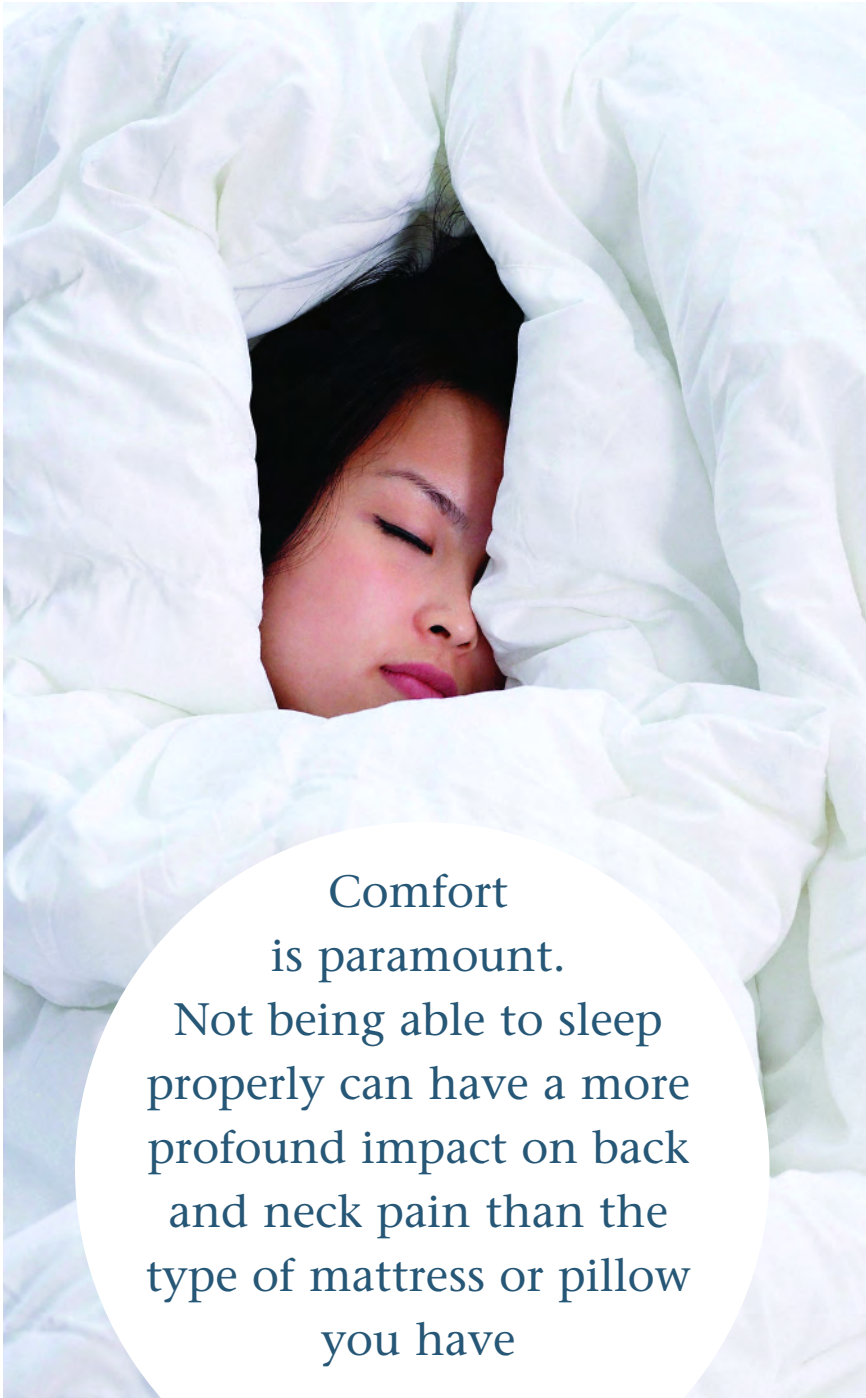
"I've certainly seen many patients who've been told by their neighbour, or someone else or the Internet, that they need to buy a stiff mattress," says Bishop. "Then they buy one and they can't sleep because it's not comfortable." And comfort is paramount. Not being able to sleep properly can have a more profound impact on back and neck pain than the type of mattress or pillow you have. "If you're sleep-deprived or your quality of sleep is poor because

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Here are some tips from the Better Sleep Council Canada to help you take the right product home.

- 1 Shop when you're alert, not tired. There's a lot of information to take in at a mattress store.
- 2 Go to a retailer with a large selection of products and prices.
- 3 Bring along your favourite pillow.
- 4 Seek out a knowledgeable salesperson to guide you through the range of options.
- 5 Shop with your sleep partner if you have one.
- 6 Overcome shyness. "A lot of people are just not comfortable lying down and test driving these mattresses with other people staring at them," says the Better Sleep Council's spokesperson Gary Baskerville. "So they tend to perch on the edge and say, 'Oh, isn't that nice! I'll take this one.'"
- 7 Lie on the mattress in your normal sleeping position. Use your pillow the way you usually do. If you sleep on your side and your partner sleeps prone, that's the way you should try the mattress. "Not just sitting on the edge!" he stresses.
- 8 Sample the mattress for several minutes. "Some of the foams and newer materials take a bit of time to respond to your body weight and pressure points, so don't just hop on and hop off," says Baskerville. Take the time to experience all the performance qualities of the mattress.
- 9 Search for a type of mattress that delivers the right comfort for you. Then buy as much quality in workmanship and materials as you can afford.





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you've got an uncomfortable mattress or pillow, that's going to have a very adverse effect on your back and neck pain," he says.

Bishop also knows of no published scientific studies to corroborate the claim that specialty materials, such as memory foam, offer superior support to the back. Yet he's willing to give mattress manufacturers the benefit of the doubt. "Just as there are no good peer-reviewed studies

proving that a particular type of mattress can help your back, there are also no studies showing that it doesn't."

So the bottom line on selecting a new mattress, he says, is to "find a comfortable one that actually lets you sleep." Any other advice? "I'd buy the one on sale."

That's probably not advice Gary Baskerville wants to hear. The Toronto-based Baskerville is

the spokesperson for the Better Sleep Council Canada, a national organization sponsored by mattress manufacturers and retailers. Baskerville recommends buying the best-quality sleep set you can afford. But that alone could cost you a sleepless night: the price tag on a premium-quality mattress can run as high as \$5,000. And for the weary but wealthy, there's the Vividus, a handmade mattress from Sweden that rings in at \$60,000! Most people, though, spend between \$800 and \$1,000 for a queen set — the most popular size in the country, Baskerville says.

About 80% of mattresses sold in Canada are the inner-spring variety, with the rest of the market split between newer specialty types. The latter category has been increasing dramatically in the past five years, says Baskerville, because "air, latex and viscoelastic memory foam products have become more sophisticated and available at popular prices." Coil mattresses are less expensive and so represent a lower risk for the buyer. In the end, most people stick with what they already know. "The specialty types have a very definite, unique feel that is just not for everyone. Because these units feel and perform so differently from what people are used to, many consumers are inclined to stick with the traditional constructions," he says.

But just because you've always slept on one type of mattress, doesn't mean you shouldn't try something new. According to chiropractor Dr. Mark Erwin, an assistant professor in the division of orthopaedic surgery at the University of Toronto and Toronto General Hospital, your mattress needs may change as you get older. "With age and changes in body composition, muscle tone, activity types and levels, there may be some age-related degenerative changes in spinal discs and/or arthritis," Erwin says. As time

goes on, these factors may create the need for more robust cushioning, shock absorption or support." In other words, the mattress type you found comfortable five or 10 years ago may not be the one that serves your current needs.

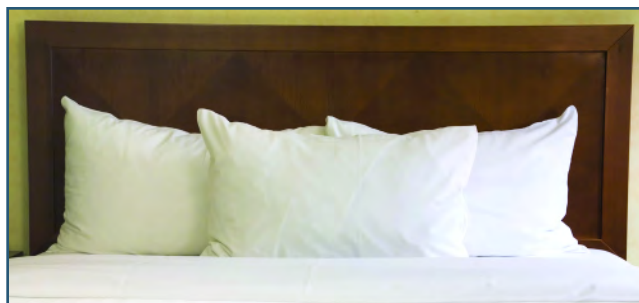
Aside from firmness and comfort factors, there are a few other things to keep in mind — heat, for example. Memory foam mattresses have a reputation for "sleeping hot." That's because the high-tech material they are made from senses heat and actually moulds itself to the sleeper's body. "So you're literally sleeping *into* the mattress, not on top of it. Some people find it a warm experience," Baskerville says. The way to handle that is by using lighter bedding or keeping the room cooler. People who always feel cold tend to like sleeping on memory foam, while others who are always hot, or who may be having hot flashes, may not be so keen. Flammability is not an issue with any modern mattress types. Nor is noise — except, potentially, with the very cheapest of coil types.

Lastly, there's the issue of size. Consider moving up to the next bigger mattress, particularly if you have a bedmate. "A larger mattress gives two sleepers a greater opportunity for isolated sleep and minimized motion transfer from one sleeper to the other, a significant issue in the world of sleep," Baskerville says.

Before you make your final decision, heed these two imperatives: try before you buy and insist on a comfort guarantee. Offered by most of the larger retailers, this contract gives you the option of selecting another model in case you err in your choice — and should prevent you from getting stuck, like Kay, with mattress nightmares. The backache you get from the wrong mattress will be compounded by the headache you acquire if you can't return the heavy slab-in-the-back occupying your bedroom.



TOP: DIRK BALRUSCH/ISTOCKPHOTO; BOTTOM: DJANE DIEDERICH/ISTOCKPHOTO



PILLOW TALK

A clear conscience may make the *best* pillow, but purchasing the *right* pillow can be as challenging as buying the right mattress, says Gary Baskerville, Toronto-based spokesperson for the Better Sleep Council Canada. Both of these involve a huge range of technology, construction, comfort, support, quality and price.

"There are 10 million pillows out there," agrees Toronto chiropractor and back specialist Dr. Mark Erwin. "And the same principle applies to pillows as to mattresses. You want to fill the gap between your shoulder and your neck. You want to try to keep your neck in as neutral a position as possible." For those who sleep on their back or side, he adds, "you don't want your neck cranked up or down. You want it in neutral. So whatever size or type of pillow keeps it that way is the one to get." Many of Erwin's patients with neck problems opt for a water-filled model, in which they can change the water level to achieve more or less support. Tummy sleepers should use the smallest pillow possible, he adds.

Vancouver spine specialist Dr. Paul Bishop, however, notes that there is no scientific evidence that your preferred sleeping position should influence the type of pillow you buy. "I do not think that spine biomechanics research has progressed to the point where it can provide us with any clear answers on whether or not any particular design of a pillow can help a patient with a sore neck — not yet anyway — other than, perhaps, a patient who has a severely degenerated neck." For the latter, Bishop recommends sleeping in the position that best minimizes symptoms, and, if possible, sleeping on the back.

The bottom line? Buy a pillow that you find comfortable in the price range that you can afford. Industry standards recommend replacing your pillow at least every two years and cleaning it every six months as it is a repository for bacteria, sloughed skin, mould, dust mites and mite feces. 