

The Guide to Choosing the Right Sleeping Pillow

Statistics indicate that more than 130 million North Americans have trouble sleeping, which can impact your physical and mental health. Sleep is a vital part of rejuvenating your physical abilities, and lack of this rest has far reaching implications into both your personal and professional life.



Selecting the right pillow for your taste, sleeping style, and comfort is the first step towards a restful night's sleep. In recent years, a wide variety of pillows have been invented to address the physical needs and comfort the most common sleeping issues, making this a wonderfully easy period in which to select a sleeping pillow that most suits your individual requirements.

There are essentially three materials from which pillows are made, with a multitude of subdivisions within each material to help you narrow your search. The three most popular pillow materials are down, polyester fill, and a new type of pillow called Memory Foam, which is a foam-like construction that conforms to the contours of your body.

The first thing to consider when you are planning to purchase a new pillow is your sleeping style. You may not have given much thought to your sleeping style in the past, but this is an integral part of proper pillow selection.

Step One: What is your sleeping style?

Your sleeping style isn't as complicated as it sounds. It is simply the manner in which you normally sleep – how you typically arrange yourself and your body when preparing for sleep. Do you lie on your back, side or your stomach when you sleep? Or, do you toss, turn and change positions frequently during the night? Since pillows are not created equally, different pillows cater to varying styles of sleeping. Understanding how you usually sleep will help you select the best pillow to help you to enjoy restful nights.

If you're not sure what your sleeping style is, pay attention to the position you are in when you fall asleep, and then again when you wake up. Are you in the same position, or has it changed? The position in which you find yourself most frequently is your sleep style. For a second opinion, you may want to consult your partner or the person with whom you sleep.

Your sleeping style can have long-term health effects, so it is important to buy a pillow that supports your body while you sleep. For example, if you sleep on your side, you may want to purchase a foam-filled side pillow that will support your back while you rest. On the other hand, as a back sleeper, you may want to opt for a memory foam pillow that will provide you with neck support. As a stomach sleeper, you may find that a very thin, yet firm, down sleeping pillow provides the most comfort.

A relaxed sleeping position enables your body to rest and recharge, ensuring that you can operate more fully while you are awake. If you are not properly supported or aligned while you sleep, you may not get a restful night's sleep, and improper support can also lead to back and other joint problems.

Step Two: What type of pillow material should I buy?

With your sleeping style in mind, let us foray into the intriguing world of sleeping pillows. Each type of material and style can make a difference in supporting your sleeping style.

There are three main materials from which pillows are made: down, foam or polyester fill, and Tempurpedic. Within each of these types of materials are several differences, or sub-categories of materials from which to choose.

Down Sleeping Pillows

The “down” in down pillows refers to the feather down of the birds from which the pillow is made. But there are different types of down, just as there are different types of birds.

- **Goose Down** – Authentic goose down is the king of kings when it comes to pillow construction. Down is soft, pliable and fluffy and was the original choice of the wealthy when pillows were first created. Goose down pillows, as indicated by the name, are pillows that are made from 100% goose down feathers. Goose down tends to be the most expensive pillow material, and its devotees swear by it. But, like many things, goose down pillows are not necessarily better than any other type of pillow—it comes down to personal taste.
- **Feather** – Feather pillows feel surprisingly like authentic down pillows, but are made from a variety of feathers, not only the feather from geese. Feather pillows usually contain some goose down feathers, which is indicated in percentages on the cover and pillow ingredients, and also other types of bird feathers, like duck feathers, which may or may not be indicated. Often a feather pillow will indicate “30% goose down, 70% feathers.” One common complaint of feather pillows versus down pillows is that whole feathers will sometimes puncture the exterior of the pillow, sticking out of the pillows and making their way into your bedroom. The feathers may also pierce the skin if they catch you just right, causing a moment of discomfort. These are ultimately minor annoyances, but important to note because some people do find this most irritating. The main benefit of feather pillows is that they feel very much like authentic goose down pillows, without the same hit to your wallet. Feather pillows are a more cost effective way to obtain a similar feel to goose down, if your budget prevents you from investing in the real thing.
- **Allergy Free Down Alternatives** – What if you love the look, feel and texture of a down pillow, and you have the budget for it, but are allergic to the feathers? A small but significant percentage of people are allergic to down and feather pillows, which has previously made these pillow materials off limits to them, but allergy free down-like alternatives have recently been developed to address this issue. These pillows are made from either feathers or goose down, but to address the issue of allergies, they are then wrapped in an eco-friendly, chemical free, allergy-friendly material. Therefore, the down is protected and insulated from the pillow user, without coming into direct contact with you and your allergies. Several companies make these allergy-protective down pillows, so if you like the feel of down but are concerned about your allergies, ask a salesperson at your local bedding store about this option.

Foam/Polyester Fill Pillows

Foam pillows are typically filled with a synthetic material, most popularly polyester, and makes for a firm, long lasting pillow. Devotees of the foam pillow often scoff at a down or feather pillow, accusing them of being too squishy to be comfortable. Again, this comes down to personal taste, but if you are looking for a very sturdy, firm pillow, you'll want to investigate the foam pillow.

Memory Foam Pillows

The original and memory foam pillow is made by Tempurpedic. Many companies now produce equal quality memory foam pillows and they have gained in worldwide popularity for its softness and comfort. Memory foam is designed to remember the contours of your body, providing support exactly where your body needs it.

These types of pillows have fans as well as detractors, and again, the choice comes down to a largely personal preference. Memory foam material is certainly very different; the pillow is "squishy" and doesn't bounce back quickly, but instead holds the shape of your head and neck. When you shift positions, it takes a few seconds for the pillow to rebound and readjust to your new position. The most popular type of memory foam pillow builds in a ridge of neck support, making it great for many back sleepers. Some people absolutely love these pillows, while others have a very hard time getting used to the feel of them.

Step Three: What thickness and firmness are right for me?

Once you've decided on the type of material you'd like for your pillow, and realized what your sleeping style is, it is time to narrow your pillow search by deciding upon the right pillow thickness for yourself. Even if you have chosen the best material for yourself, selecting a pillow that is either too thick or too thin will compromise your sleep. There are also several different pillow shapes to choose from, ranging from square to rectangular, adding another variable to mix.

Pillow Thickness and Firmness

All pillows come in a variety of thicknesses and firmnesses. Thickness is not the same as firmness; it is possible to have a thin pillow that is firm, or a thin pillow that is soft. The same is true for each thickness of pillow – it will be available in a variety of densities.

There are generally four categories for firmness: soft, medium, firm, and extra firm. There may be subcategories under each of these depending on the language and terminology a company chooses to use, but these four basic terms will get you started on your search for the ideal pillow.

Down and feather pillows are measured by what is known in the industry as "fill power," which is a measure for how many feathers are used in the pillow, which impacts its thickness and firmness.

Foam pillows come in a few standard thicknesses and are measured for firmness, which will be clearly marked on the label. But it is important to always test your pillow in the store; what the manufacturer calls “medium firmness” you may find to be firm. Use the terminology as a gauge for where to start—not as canonized language.

Broadly speaking, people who sleep on their stomachs or sides typically find the most comfort with thin pillows, as there is less strain on the neck. On the other hand, many back sleepers enjoy a thicker pillow that supports both the neck and head. Each individual’s spinal shape and sleeping style creates pillow needs that are different, and thus, testing out various firmnesses and thicknesses helps you ascertain which is best for your peaceful rest.

Step Four: What are the sleeping pillow shapes that are good for me?

Pillows come in a variety of shapes, some of which comes down to preference, and some of which have a specific design. The most popular pillow shape is a rectangular shape, which can vary in size, but have the purpose of supporting the head, neck and shoulders. Square pillows have become a more popular shape for sleeping pillows in recent years, and their narrower width is used primarily to support the head. Square pillows have gained popularity because their size and shape lends them to double as decorative pillows.

Historically, pillows have been used to support the head, or a combination of the head, neck, and shoulders during sleep. In recent years, several other types of pillows have been developed to support different areas of the body.

Head Pillows

Head pillows are by far the most popular kind of pillow. This is as standard pillow that supports the head, and these can be positioned to support the neck and shoulders as well. The wealthy classes used these pillows as far back as Ancient Egypt. These classes didn’t want to sleep with their head and bodies on the same plane, and they wished to have their heads elevated during sleep. Thus, the head pillow was created, and it has sustained throughout history as the most common pillow type.

Neck Pillows

Neck pillows are designed to mainly support the neck. Some people find that sleeping with a head pillow places too much pressure on the neck and leaves them feeling stiff and with a sore neck in the morning. Neck pillows are designed with the main support targeted at elevating the neck, rather than the head.

There are two main shapes for a neck pillow. One is a rectangular shape, and with a “s” lip at the bottom edge of the pillow. These few inches of support are meant to be placed directly under the neck for support. There is a gentle slope that angles into the remainder of the pillow, where the head will rest.

The other main type of neck pillow is also know as a travel pillow because it is a relatively small and packable pillow that is easy to take with you on a journey. This pillow has a circular shape, with a hollow center, similar to

the shape of a bagel or a doughnut. There is an opening on one edge of the circle so you can open the pillow and clasp it around your neck. The design of this pillow is also to support the neck, rather than the head.

Side and Body Pillows

Side pillows and body pillows have a variety of designs and uses. These were originally designed for pregnant women who had difficulty finding a comfortable position in which to sleep, but they have now taken off and become popular for people with chronic pain, back problems, arthritis, and other ailments.

The side pillow is generally a rectangular shape and is used to support the side of your body, mainly if you sleep on your side. A side sleeper sometimes likes extra support either in front or behind them to make the side sleeping position more comfortable. If you sleep on your side, your back may not be properly supported which can lead to spine and back problems. Using a side pillow for extra support is one way to ensure that your spine and back are well protected.

A body pillow is an extra-long rectangular pillow that is used for comfort and full body support. This pillow is particularly popular with pregnant women who have difficulty finding a comfortable position in bed, as well as people suffering from chronic pain or fatigue related illnesses. A body pillow is often used by side sleepers, who want a longer bit of support than the typical side pillow provides. The body pillow can be several feet long, usually extending about half of the height of an average person. Side sleepers like to curl up with the body pillow, using it for their head, as well as to support their body. It can also be placed down the length of the back of a side sleeper for additional back support.

Step Five: Remembering the health and comfort of your body

The way we sleep, along with our quality of sleep, can have a significant influence on both our physical and mental health. Some sleep disorders are related to orthopedic conditions that have their origins in the musculoskeletal system, triggered or increased by improper support of the head, neck and body.

Sleep deprivation can cause a variety of physical and emotional problems, which can greatly impact your day-to-day life, as well as the overall quality of your life. Choosing the correct pillow for your sleeping style, comfort and taste is one of the first steps towards having a night of peaceful sleep, which leads to a productive day and an increased feeling of energy. A good pillow is certainly a step in the right direction for a comfortable nights' sleep, along with the health of your back and spine.

Remember that one pillow-filling, thickness, size or style is not inherently better than another. The way you sleep is different for each person, which makes selecting a pillow a wholly personal choice. Make sure you test out several pillows while you are shopping, allowing you to experience the variety of pillows that exist, before making your final choice and settling on your new nighttime companion.