

Pillowtalk

We spend one-third of our lives asleep. But when it comes to making the most of your shut-eye hours, it can be complicated. Here's our lowdown

Deep, restful sleep is critical for the rest and rejuvenation of many of our vital systems. Experts suggest that in order to function well the average person needs about eight hours sleep a night. So, in fact, nearly one-third of our lives are spent sleeping — that adds up to a whopping 24 years over the average lifetime.

So if you're not getting a good sleep because your neck hurts, your hip aches, you have sleep apnoea or you snore (or your partner does), it's time to know the latest research on sleeping, pillows, mattresses and anything that can bring a better night's sleep.

Pillows and positions

Unbiased research in this area is difficult to find as most research is commissioned by individual manufacturers to examine their own products.

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One of the few completely independent studies, however, has been done by Dr Susan Gordon, now a senior lecturer in physiotherapy at James Cook University near Townsville. She did her PhD at the University of South Australia examining how people sleep, the types of pillows they use and whether it is common to wake with certain symptoms such as neck stiffness or headaches.

In the initial part of her expansive study, Dr Gordon studied 812 people in 2001 in Port Lincoln, South Australia. She asked them about their pillows and how they were sleeping. She also asked them if they woke with any symptoms and found that 46 per cent said they

woke at least once a week with symptoms such as neck pain or stiffness, headaches or aching between their shoulder blades or in their arms. Women were more likely to wake with headaches and men were more likely to wake with neck stiffness.

Dr Gordon next investigated whether the position a person slept in would affect the quality of their sleep and whether they would wake with symptoms. Interestingly, the most common position for people to sleep in is on their side and it is also the position that this study found was associated with the best sleep quality.

The worst position for sleep quality was sleeping in an upright position (something people who have reflux or asthma might use). Sleeping on your back or your tummy made no difference to symptoms although,

anecdotally, I have found that tummy sleeping is really hard on most necks and sleeping on your back makes you more likely to snore.

Dr Gordon's team then tested five pillows (latex rubber, polyester, foam, feather and foam contour) on people who sleep on their side. The results showed that latex rubber was definitely the best in terms of decreasing your likelihood of waking with symptoms and feather was the worst. However, as Dr Gordon admitted at the 2007 National Physiotherapy Conference, many people reported they prefer their feather pillows!

Her conclusion was that the real issue was almost impossible to solve as we don't fully understand what exactly makes a pillow comfortable for each individual and, while the pillow may be part of the problem, there are so many other things that may contribute to poor night's sleep — such as sleep apnoea, asthma or stress — that pinpointing



the effect of a pillow is very difficult.

Interestingly, in her study, about 10 per cent of all participants weren't affected by any pillow they slept on (you know those annoying people who can travel anywhere and don't care if the pillow in the hotel is like a rock!). Another 20 per cent had symptoms no matter which pillow they slept on.

If you're thinking of buying a new pillow (and the choice is daunting), write down all the reasons you like or possibly dislike your old pillow before you go looking. Then go to the store and make sure you can lie on a bed to test the pillow and lie on your side for at least 10 minutes to really test the comfort.

Also, think about the height from your ear to your shoulder. Most pillows now come in a range of heights. If you have tiny shoulders and a short neck you only need a low pillow. Big, broad shoulders and a long neck need a little more height.

→ For more information on Dr Gordon's recommendations for tips on buying pillows visit www.wakeupbetter.com.

Mattresses

If you think pillow research is tricky, mattress research is even trickier as, again, most of the research has been funded by the mattress companies. The basic premise is that a neutral posture of the body (think of keeping your spine in a straight line as if you were standing straight) imposes the least amount of stress on our discs and joints. The ideal mattress is supposed to take up the natural contours of your body and relieve the excessive pressures.

One Australian study found **46 per cent of people wake at least once a week with symptoms such as neck pain or stiffness, headaches or aching between their shoulder blades or in their arms.**

One of the consistent things we do know is that inner spring mattresses do suffer from sag and should be replaced every eight to 10 years. They should also be turned regularly. Visit the Physiotherapy Association at www.apa.advsol.com.au or the Chiropractic Association on www.chiropractors.asn.au.

You can divide mattresses into four main groups:

1 INNER SPRING

From talking to a number of retailers, these still seem to be the most popular. The quality and materials vary widely

Tips for a better night's sleep

→ Aching shoulder/sore neck when lying on your side at night

Try what I call a "snuggle pillow", a small scatter cushion you cuddle against your chest and rest your arm on. It takes an enormous amount of pressure off your neck and helps keep your shoulders from "scrunching" when you are sleeping.

→ Cannot get comfortable with any single pillow

Try two flatter ones instead. The first one is for the space between your ear and your shoulder; put the second one on top and then snuggle it around your neck to mould into the gap between your neck and your pillow. Then use your snuggle pillow to take the load off your shoulder. It seems like a lot of pillows to get used to but for people with long, skinny necks this is particularly good.

→ Love sleeping on your back but your back aches in the night

Put a pillow under your knees to take the load off your spinal joints.

→ Sleeping on your side gives you back ache but you can't sleep well on your back, either

This is a typical pregnant lady issue and the simple solution of a pillow between the knees usually fixes the problem. People with hip bursitis or very wide hips may also find this a good solution.

→ One partner feels the heat, the other can never get warm enough

I found this solution when travelling in Austria. Have two single bed doonas on the bed instead of one queen. One can be heavier than the other. That way you can accommodate both body temperatures. Over there, they leave them neatly rolled at the bottom of the bed during the day

and you just pull them up at night.

→ Thinking too much in the night

Keep a pen and a pad next to your bed. When you're tossing and turning thinking of something in the night, write it down. Your brain will relax because you have "downloaded" whatever it is to hard copy and can now relax and go back to sleep.

→ Going to the toilet two or more times a night

This condition is called nocturia and unless you are over 75 it is not normal. It means that you may have some weakness in your pelvic floor muscles that needs retraining. Phone (03) 9092 0888 or see www.physiotherapy.asn.au for your nearest pelvic floor physio.



and you can pay anywhere from \$600 to \$6000 plus. Many have been developed in consultation with associations such as the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) or the Chiropractors Association of Australia (CAA). If you search both of these associations' websites you will find detailed information about their recommendations for certain types of mattresses.

2 LATEX

Made from a natural rubber product, these have gained popularity recently. However, it appears that not all latex mattresses are created equal. Some cheaper ones may not provide the feel and support

or last, so you may get what you pay for. The properties of latex rubber allow it to adjust to the contours of your body which alleviates the pressure on hips and shoulders. It's a good product for asthma or allergy sufferers as it doesn't allow dust mites, mould or fungus to settle into the mattress. However, a certain percentage of people are allergic to latex itself, so check that that isn't you. Prices range from \$2000 to \$4500.

3 MEMORY/VISCO FOAM
The technology for this often purports to have evolved from the original 1970s NASA research on



If you're going to have 24 years of sleep in your lifetime, it definitely should be in comfort.

Do your research before you go to a bedding shop. **Wear comfy clothes and slip-on shoes.** When you get there, don't be embarrassed to lie down for a good 10 minutes.

astronauts' comfort. Again, there is no hard medical evidence that any of these mattresses are more beneficial than others, but the Swedish Tempur-Pedic mattress is certainly widely popular. It aims to absorb pressure points and is also low-allergenic.

These are slightly more difficult to test in-store as they are made from heat-responsive visco-elastic foam that softens in warmer environments so it takes a while to mould into your body. You also need to lie down gently on it and then wait for it to mould to your shape. Prices start from \$2500 to \$3000.

4 CUSTOM MATTRESSES
These include the Australian Futura range, a Victorian-based range designed by a structural engineer, Mario Piriano, who felt that existing beds did not accommodate individual body types. He recruited the Biomechanics Research Laboratory of one of Melbourne's public universities and researchers from the School of Chiropractic at Macquarie University to do some trials on various beds and bedding to look at whether they were actually providing the support they purported to give. He then designed his own range of inner-spring mattresses, their unique element being an ability to vary the degree of support along the body independently for

each partner (much the same as in modern motor cars with adjustable seats and lumbar support etc). Users can give themselves as much (or as little) back support as their body needs. A particularly unique feature is that the support pressure at both the shoulder and hips can be decreased. Prices begin at \$1200.

For more information visit www.spinalsupport.com.au and www.beds4backs.com.au.

What to do when you walk into the store

Make sure you do your research before you go. Think about what you have liked (or hated) about your old bed and think about how much you and your partner move around in the night. Wear comfy clothes and slip-on shoes and, when you get there, don't be embarrassed to lie down (with your partner if you have one) and stay there for a good 10 minutes.

Don Stratton has worked in the bedding department of David Jones for 37 years. He has seen huge changes in bedding styles but says that generally a bed can be found to suit every need. He says many people walk in slightly confused about what they actually want in a bed and the range and choice are often daunting.

"Nine out of 10 people will tell you they

want a firm mattress but when you actually try laying them down, it's not really what they want at all. What they really want is support." He waits until they lie down and then looks at how they lie on the bed in order to recommend certain beds.

He says the most difficult thing is when there is a broad-shouldered, tall husband and a shorter, petite wife. Often finding the right bed for both of them will be the issue. This is where he has found latex is quite good as the lack of springs means less "partner disturbance". I think it is relevant here to note that a number of studies have looked at how often people move in the night, and the average was 11 to 13 body shifts per night. So if you have a partner who moves a lot and you are a non-shifter, that can make buying the right mattress even trickier!

According to most retailers I spoke to, inner-spring mattresses still seem to be the most popular although latex is gradually gaining ground. Prices for inner-spring ensembles range from about \$700 for the entry-level inner-spring to an incredible \$19,000 for the top-of-the-line Sealy Posturpedic Crown Jewel, which has synthetic light fibres, a latex cover and lots of cashmere. Amazingly, they sell quite a few of these, which just goes to show how much people are prepared to pay for the promise of a good night's sleep. ♦

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www.physiocese.com.au