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Experts tell Joyce Teo what to consider when buying a mattress

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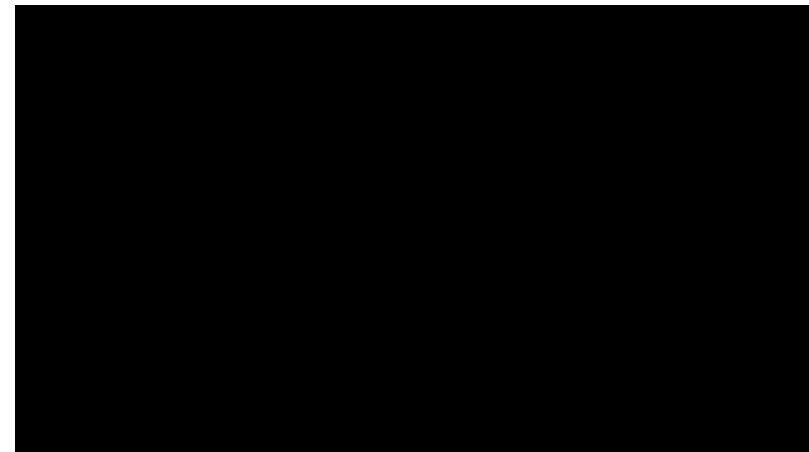
It is almost the end of the year and if you are thinking of renovating your home, you might want to think about getting a new mattress too.

Organisations funded by bed manufacturers recommend that we evaluate the need to replace our mattress after seven years.

A mattress can affect the quality of your sleep and aggravate lower back pain, if you have this problem.

Generally, you will have a good night's sleep if your sleep surface relieves pressure on the joints and other areas of your body.

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There are innerspring mattresses that use a steel coil support system, latex mattresses, foam mattresses, water beds and more.

The choice of a mattress can be highly personal but here are some points to consider.

1. It is not true that the firmer the mattress, the better it is for your lower back

A firm mattress is not a "must" for people with lower back pain, said Dr Chua Soo Yong, an associate spine specialist and surgeon from Singapore Medical Group's Centre for Spine and Orthopaedic Surgery at Paragon Medical.

"What is most important is a mattress that provides comfort, support and a good night's rest."

Indeed, people often link firmness with better support, said Dr Siow Hua Ming, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon from Providence Orthopaedics at Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Centre.

"However, recent studies show that maximum support and back pain relief are provided by a medium-firm mattress."

A mattress that is too firm may not conform to the natural resting curves of your spine to provide adequate support, he said.

"The best way to choose a mattress that won't aggravate your back pain is by trial and error."

So, take time to try various mattresses before you buy the one that feels the most comfortable.

2. There is no specific type of mattress that will relieve back pain

There is conflicting evidence for how much a mattress can help to ease your back pain.

For instance, while manufacturers claim the superior firmness of their products can do so, a paper in 2008 suggested that a waterbed and foam mattress may be better than a futon, which is a traditional Japanese mattress, in relieving chronic lower back pain.

However, the differences were small, said Dr Chua. The paper was done by The Back Research Center at the University of Southern Denmark.

Another article in 2009, which studied a total of 4,180 subjects in China, found that sleeping on a firmer bed appeared to have protective effects against disc herniation (a herniated disc is sometimes called a ruptured disc or a slipped disc), among other findings, Dr Chua said.

3. Avoid mattresses that are too soft or too firm

"Patients with back issues should avoid mattresses that are too soft or too firm," said Dr Chua.

If they are too firm, they might cause the body to rest in an awkward position, which will aggravate the pain, he said.

Beds that are too soft may sag in the middle under your body weight. This puts your back in an unnatural position and may cause back pain and discomfort, said Dr Siow.

4. Not all beds are equal

Waterbeds and airbeds are great for evenly distributing the pressure points from a person's body weight, and are often used in the care of patients who are immobile or bed-



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ound, said Dr Siow.

"Depending on the manufacturer, you should be able to easily adjust the firmness of a waterbed or airbed to your comfort."

Waterbeds can either be hard-sided, with a water-containing mattress in a wooden frame, or soft-sided, with the mattress within a foam frame.

Airbeds use an adjustable air chamber as the support system.

While other types of mattresses are not adjustable, they can still be modified to be more comfortable.

"With a foam, latex or spring mattress, you can adjust for back comfort by using an additional thin layer of bedding on top of an overly firm mattress. If the mattress is too soft, you can insert a stack of plywood between your mattress and its frame," said Dr Siow.

5. Know when to change your mattress

All forms of material undergo degradation. After a period of time, the material will not be what it once was.

"The support provided when it was relatively new might not provide the same effect any longer," said Dr Chua.

"When you notice that the mattress sags more or does not cushion your body the way it used to, it might be a sign that it is no longer providing good support."

Increased symptoms of back pain might be another sign, he said.

According to organisations funded by bed manufacturers, other signs you can look out for include:

- Signs of overuse, such as a lumpy bed;
- The quality of your sleep, for instance, if you have had your best night's sleep elsewhere, such as in a hotel bed or a friend's bed; and
- You wake up with aches and pains that disappear over the course of the day.

6. Soft and sagging beds are not ideal for kids

A baby should sleep on a firm mattress to prevent him from sinking into it and accidentally suffocating.

"Try to avoid hand-me-down mattresses for children. They could be worn down and provide less support for a growing child's spine alignment," said Dr Siow.

He said parents or caregivers can consider involving an older child in the purchase of his own mattress, so that they can evaluate the level of comfort and support for themselves.

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