

# Mattress Shopping Guidelines

## Finding the best quality and value

I've had so many questions on the forum asking about [major brand mattresses](#) or mass market mattress retailers that I thought it would be helpful to put together a set of guidelines to help consumers bypass most of the traps and pitfalls of mattress shopping and to help cut through the confusion and frustration of finding your perfect mattress. While these guidelines will in most cases eliminate 75-90% of the mattresses that most people would normally consider or purchase (without realizing the poor quality or value of the mattresses they are looking at or which they were led to through misleading advertising and claims) ... it will also help to find the remaining 10 - 25% which is where real quality and value lives.

I will edit or add to these over time but for now here are my "top ten" ...

**1. Avoid buying a mattress made by any of the major national brands such as Sealy, Simmons, Serta, Tempurpedic.** While they are not all "bad" mattresses and some may even be good quality, ... for most people and circumstances, none of them would have good value when compared to similar mattresses made by smaller independent manufacturers.

**2. Buy a mattress based on the quality of materials that are in it and how it is constructed ... never by the brand.** Every mattress manufacturer or retailer should be able to tell you exactly what is in every mattress they sell layer by layer (from a cutaway or spec sheet) and the benefits and qualities of each material and layer. This includes the density of any polyfoam or memory foam, the type and blend of any latex, the type of fabrics or quilting materials or fibers that are used in the mattress cover (ticking), and any other materials in the mattress. If they can't or won't provide this information ... pass them by unless you are willing to go through the time and frustration of trying to find out yourself and hitting the many roadblocks that may be involved in trying to research and discover this information if it is even available at all

**3. Focus your attention on local factory direct manufacturer outlets or smaller sleep shops who carry alternative brands** and have a direct relationship with the manufacturer. These will generally have the most knowledgeable salespeople and the best value and will be more interested in helping you find a mattress that is perfect for your own unique needs instead of selling you something they can get you excited about with a (mostly misleading) story. These are the places which usually will be open and transparent about the materials in your mattress and encourage comparison shopping rather than using sales techniques.

**4. Never buy a mattress with more than around an inch or so of lower density polyfoam (less than 1.8 lbs or so in one sided or 1.5 lbs in two sided) or memory foam (less than 4.0 lbs or so) or unknown foam in the comfort layers** (upper pressure relieving layers) and the quilting combined as this could become the weak

link in your mattress and could be subject to early softening and body impressions. Warranties will not usually cover this because of their exclusions and because the softening of memory foam and polyfoam and the loss of comfort and support that goes with it is considered "normal". If you break this rule because of a very low budget, only break it with a local manufacturer or sleep shop like those in #3 who can tell you the exact quality and specs of the polyfoam they use (and why), use it in more appropriate layer thicknesses or designs, and will tell you truthfully how long you can reasonably expect it to last.

**5. Never let a "major sale" create a sense of urgency.** Quality mattresses with great value are available year round at better retailers and manufacturers and the so-called "sale prices" that are offered by most of the mainstream stores and major brands (and even some of the smaller ones) are often a complete gimmick. Sale prices of 30, 40, 50% or more off are a major warning sign (and never really end) since nobody ever buys these mattresses at regular prices anyway. These fake sale prices are meant to encourage you to buy based on a false perception of value or based on a sense of urgency when in fact they are often still very much overpriced based on the materials in the mattress. While even good stores or manufacturers will occasionally have a sale ... they will be discounted from selling prices that already have good value and be for a smaller discount and for a legitimate reason.

**6. When you are mattress testing ... test for the two main functions of a mattress** (pressure relief and spinal alignment) using the testing guidelines linked in the [tutorial post here](#). Never test for the "overall comfort" of a mattress or put any faith in words like "supportive", "comfortable" "firm", "soft" and many other general or relative terms. Comfort is subjective and mostly about pressure relief in the top layers and support is mostly about how the lower layers keep your spine in alignment. Both are different for everyone and all mattresses need different degrees of firmness and softness in different layers to fit your body profile, sleeping positions, and preferences.

**7. Decide on the midpoint of your budget** (the price you want to stay under with everything included but could go a little over for your absolutely perfect mattress) but then test mattresses in any price range for "PPP" (**P**ressure relief, **P**osture, and **P**references) to find the general layering, materials, and feel that work best for you. Once you know the general layering and style of mattresses that tend to work well for your weight, body profile, and sleeping positions (thickness and softness of the comfort layers and firmness and makeup of the support layers), you can use this knowledge as a guideline to find an appropriate mattress in any budget range. Lower budget mattresses that use lower cost and less durable materials can provide very good sleeping comfort, particularly if you use higher quality materials on top. The tradeoff is that they won't do it quite as well or for as long as higher quality materials that will keep their original qualities for much longer.

**8. Don't get involved with all the intricacies of mattress innersprings and coil counting** if you are considering an innerspring mattress. Most of what you will hear is not much more than a story designed to impress you so you will buy the mattress they are trying to sell. A mattress is not about coil counts ... it's about pressure relief and correct alignment and your "lie on bed" testing will tell you about both. The weak link of

almost every mattress is in the layers used above the innerspring (or a foam core) ... not the innersprings themselves. For those that are interested there is more about the different types of innersprings in [this article](#).

**9. Never buy a mattress on the same day you do mattress testing** unless you are certain that you have found your perfect mattress at the best value available in the city where you live. Many mattress stores have very refined sales techniques which are designed to discourage meaningful comparisons based on materials and encourage you to make decisions based on stories and sales techniques.

**10. Know that what you end up buying is what you want.** Don't let warranties or comfort exchanges be a major or primary consideration in your final decision as these too are mostly gimmicks and used as sales techniques that are designed to keep your money in the store and have many exclusions, qualifications, restrictions, and fees involved. Buy a mattress as if you only have one chance to buy your best choice and don't rely on any exchange or return policy unless it is a complete no questions asked refund with few if any qualifications or fees involved.

In practical terms ... you will be looking at a comfort layer which is either polyfoam, memory foam (if you know for certain that you sleep well on memory foam) or latex (which is a higher quality and more durable material). Polyfoam (more than 1") as mentioned in #4 should be a last resort unless you know for certain it is a higher grade of polyfoam and your budget calls for it. If you wish to consider other non foam options in your comfort layers ... you can read about them [here](#).

Also in practical terms ... you will usually be looking at a support core made of an innerspring, latex, or high quality polyfoam (high quality polyfoam is OK in the support layers of a "hybrid" mattress because it's denser and firmer and not subject to the same wear and tear as the comfort layers). You can read about the various support core options [here](#).

These guidelines should help you avoid the biggest pitfalls and traps in buying a mattress. None of these guidelines are "absolute" of course but it is much better to stick to them than to try to find the rare exceptions where they may not apply.

Of course if you have any questions along the way ... feel free to post them in [our forums](#).