



Selecting Upholstered Furniture

Shopping for upholstered furniture can be confusing. There are over 5000 furniture manufacturers in the nation. Some are large companies and some are small. All of them add to the limitless variety of choices available to you.

Styles vary considerably from traditional to contemporary. You can buy sofas (sometimes called a couch or davenport) and chairs individually or in sets. A sofa or loveseat, chair and ottoman are often sold as sets during promotional sales by furniture and department stores. Sofas and chairs may be totally padded and covered with fabric or they may be partially upholstered, depending on style and design.

Upholstered furniture should be scaled and proportioned for the space you have and for the other furnishings with which it will be used. It must be aesthetically pleasing to you. Market trends vary, but avoid selecting fad items. They soon will look out of place and be uncomfortable to use.

The quality of upholstered furniture may be more difficult to evaluate since furniture frames are padded and covered with upholstery fabric. However, there are some guidelines that can be used. As you look at different furniture pieces, pay close attention to five important areas—the **frame**, **springs**, **filling**, **padding** and **outer covering fabric**.

Facts On Frames...

The frame is the base upon which a sofa or other upholstered piece of furniture is built. A strong base generally means a long-lasting product.

Frames may be of wood, steel, molded plastic or fiberglass. Good frames are made of hardwoods, such as oak, elm and hickory. These woods are strong, long lasting and a sign of quality furniture. Softwood or plywood frames should be checked carefully for quality of construction. Be aware that these pieces will probably not be as durable as hardwood. A few contemporary pieces are made of molded, high-resiliency polyurethane foam. The high density of these foam shapes eliminates the need for any additional frame.

Glued, double-doweled joints and corner blocks that are glued and screwed into the frame indicate good quality craftsmanship. Nailed frames are not as sturdy as doweled frames. A dust cover (lightweight fabric covering the bottom of the frame) often prevents you from seeing the inside construction when you look at the underside of furniture. However, you should be able to either see or feel the corner blocks through this covering.

Lift up one end of a sofa or an arm of a chair. Then push on the arms, back or wings. There should be little or no give when you do this. Avoid upholstered furniture that is shaky or squeaky. Look at and feel the finish on the exposed wood parts. The surface should be smooth, attractive and free of blemishes.

Spotlight On Springs...

Springs provide upholstered furniture with an added measure of “give” and bounce, but not all upholstered furniture has springs. In many cases, a polyurethane filling alone provides enough spring. This is especially true with high-resilience and high density foams. Quality pieces may have high-density foams resting on a bed of springs for an added dimension of comfort. Furniture manufacturers select construction methods appropriate for a specific furniture style.

Three types of springs are most often used in upholstered furniture. Sinuous or S-shaped springs usually run from front to back. Drop-in springs are pre-assembled coiled units that are dropped into frames as a whole. And 8-way hand-tied coil springs are tied to springs on either side and front and back-eight ways, all together. They are the most costly.

Springs should be bouncy, but they shouldn’t bottom out or hit against the frame. Springs should also be tied together for comfort and durability. They should not squeak when you sit or move around on the chair or sofa.

Facts On Fillings...

The filling is what provides the springy support and comfort to furniture. It also adds to the shape and styling. Most furniture is upholstered with foam. The foam is a cellular material made up of polyurethane and air. The higher a foam’s density, the greater the amount of polyurethane used and, as a result, the less air in the filling.

After a period of use in the home, the fabric on the seat cushions may look wrinkled. In reality, the fabric may not have stretched. It may be that the cushion is made of low density foam, and it has failed. It no longer fills the cushion cover, so the fabric looks wrinkled.

Foams that have a higher polymer density (pure polyurethane with no compounds added) provide better support, are more comfortable and last longer. Quality polyurethane foam cushioning should have a density of 1.8 lbs. per cubic foot or higher. This means that the amount of foam that fits into a cube measuring 12" x 12" x 12" should weigh at least 1.8 pounds.

Test for a high quality, high-density polyurethane foam by sitting on the cushion. Low-density cushions give little support, and you may “hit bottom” on them. Also, ask the sales person for information about the polymer density of the foam to check that no other compounds have been added to increase the density or make it appear heavier. The salesperson can check with catalogs or the manufacturer for more information if needed.

Points On Padding...

The padding on an upholstered piece is important. It’s easy to overlook since it’s hidden

beneath the upholstery fabric and often difficult to see. However, if you have seen two pieces of furniture with the same cover fabric and a comparatively large price difference, carefully examine both the frame and padding. The lower-priced piece most likely has a lighter frame and may not be as well-padded. Paddings are usually used in combinations. They provide shape, comfort and keep the springs and framing material from wearing on the upholstery fabric. Polyurethane, polyester fiberfills and cotton batting are most commonly used as padding. Down is sometimes used in more costly upholstered furniture.

Sheets of polyurethane foam sheet is comfortable, durable, easily shaped and contoured, lightweight and relatively inexpensive. Good, high-quality polyurethane foam should provide about 20 years of service. Chopped polyurethane foam has the same basic characteristics as foam sheet but rarely has an equivalent service life. Polyester fiberfill keeps its loft and resiliency for a longer period of time than cotton batting. However, both perform well and provide good comfort.

Foam used alone to pad a chair or cushion produces a sharp, harsh-edged look. Upholstery fabric often creeps when used on foam. To eliminate the creeping problem and soften the appearance of the piece, a layer or two of cotton or polyester is used over the foam. When shopping, unzip the cover to check whether a muslin or down-proof ticking has been used. This cover helps to eliminate any creeping fabric over foam and keeps padding in place.

Feel all edges of the framework of the piece – arms, top, back, exposed edges beneath a loose cushion, all edges of fixed-cushion seats, edges of wings. You will know there's a hard frame beneath, but you should not be able to feel or see its shape and size. If you feel the edges of the frame, the edges of the upholstery fabric may show wear.

In addition to checking padding in the seat, back cushion and frame for comfort, a couple of other critical check points should be remembered. In a loose-cushioned piece, feel the deck carefully. It should be padded well enough that you cannot feel the springs beneath. Otherwise, the springs may wear out the cushion.

Details About Decking...

Decking fabric covers the seat platform beneath loose cushions. This fabric should be closely woven, smooth and harmonize with the upholstery fabric. In some cases, the upholstery fabric may be used as decking. However, this can add to the cost to a piece if the upholstery fabric is high-priced. Denim, percale or muslin frequently are used in decking.

Focus On Fabrics...

Fabric serves two purposes. First, it has a decorative function and is often a major consideration in the final selection of upholstered furniture. In addition it helps to protect the rest of the piece from wear. Prices vary widely. Keep in mind that a high price might mean high fashion rather than high durability or quality. Don't be timid about asking questions and closely examining the fabric swatch. As you shop, keep your needs and lifestyle in mind.

Upholstery fabric selection is a matter of personal taste, but there are certain things to consider. Although fibers are important to durability and beauty, fabric construction is also crucial. Many people think if something is nylon, it's a good buy. Unfortunately, there are poorly constructed nylon fabrics on the market just as there are other kinds of poorly constructed fabrics. Yarns may separate and wear quickly on closely woven fabrics. A general rule-of-thumb is: The tighter the weave, the longer the wear.

Other important guidelines for durability include the twist of yarns and type of construction. Consider the following checkpoints when selecting fabric for durability.

- In general the more tightly twisted the yarns, the stronger and more durable the fabric will be. Fuzzy or low-twist yarns are softer and often have interesting textures, but they will wear more quickly and be less resistant to moisture stains.
- A balanced weave having warp (lengthwise) and filler (crosswise) yarns of about equal number, similar size and strength, will be more durable than an unbalanced weave having different yarn sizes and strengths for warp and filling.
- Twill weaves resist wear and soil better than plain weaves.
- Satin and Jacquard weaves, including damask, brocade, brocatelle and matelasse', all have "floating" yarns on the fabric surface. These tend to snag and wear more quickly. They're not recommended for heavy use areas.
- Pile fabrics such as velvet, plush and frieze are quite durable when firmly constructed. Fabrics with pile of uncut loops mat less easily than those with cut loops. Some pile fabrics are tufted. The closer together tufts are placed, the more durable the fabric will be.
- Look carefully at latex-backed fabrics. Latex backings are sometimes used on upholstery fabric. They provide dimensional stability and keep fabric from slipping on cushions. Hold the fabric up to the light so that you can see through it. If the fabric is tightly constructed, you'll see very little light. If it's loosely constructed, you'll be able to see considerable light.

Other checkpoints for the selection of upholstery fabric include:

- Examine the raw edges of the fabric. Does it fray or ravel easily? If so, yarn will shift and pull away at the seams, especially in cushions and where fabric is attached to the furniture frame.
- Stretch the fabric diagonally. Does it stretch and then completely recover? If so, it will hold its shape without wrinkling.

Many velvet- and suede-like fabrics used in upholstery today are made by a process called "flocking". Short fibers are embedded electrostatically or mechanically into a fabric-backed (loosely woven or knit) bed of latex adhesive. Nylon, polyester, acrylic, olefin and rayon all are used for flocking. Nylon-flocked fabric tends to be quite durable. Rayon costs less but does not wear as well.

Plastic fabrics come in flat, fabric-backed and expanded fabric-vinyl. A flat vinyl costs less but may tear easily, dry out and crack in a fairly short period of time. Expanded fabric-backed vinyl is more expensive vinyl, but is also more comfortable (it breathes) and durable. Vinyl cleans easily, and better quality vinyls can be mended fairly successfully.

Leather is available in many qualities. It is relatively expensive but quite durable and long-lasting. Leather upholstery is being heavily promoted, and some leather covers are less than top quality. You should know leather quite well before you invest a large sum in it. Read about leather identification and carefully examine the hide with a magnifying glass to be sure it has not been tampered with.

Top grain leather is the best quality. First- and second-split leathers cost less and are less pliable. Top grain leather is available in natural, glazed high-gloss and dull finishes. The gloss and dull finishes are achieved by buffing the leather.

Fabric Finishes...

Stain resistant finishes resist soiling and stains, but will not protect from all types of soils and stains. It will resist most food, beverage and pet accident stains, but will not guard against household chemical stains such as chlorine bleaches and cleaners or acne medication containing benzoyl peroxide. Stains that can alter or destroy dyes in stain and soil-resistant fabrics include red wine, swimming pool chemicals and furniture polish. Many common soils and stains can be removed by blotting with water, water and a non-bleaching mild detergent solution or other simple technique. Since recommended cleaning procedures for treated fabrics may differ from those used in the past, check the specific recommendations of the manufacturer before attempting home or professional cleaning solutions. Using unapproved chemicals or procedures for cleaning may void a warranty.

Soil resistant finishes protect fabric by keeping dirt from sticking so tightly to the fibers and provides some protection against stains. These finishes may be fluorochemical or silicone. *Fluorochemical* treatments protect against both water- and oil-borne soils and resists wetting by oily and watery liquids. *Silicone* treatments protect against water-borne soils and watery liquids only.

Examples of silicone treatments include Fabric-Coate® and Total Seal®. Scotchgard™ and Teflon® are examples of fluorochemical finishes applied to fabrics by manufacturers. Many manufacturers attach tags to furniture informing consumers when a soil resistant finish is applied, but some retailers may remove the tags. Ask whether the fabric you are selecting has already been treated during manufacturing. A factory-applied finish is usually more durable and costs less than one applied by a retailer. Retail finishes can be applied at furniture stores or products are available at hardware stores, discount houses and supermarkets for home applications. If a fabric has one finish, another is usually not necessary unless the finish has worn off. When treating furniture, it is important to determine if a fluorochemical finish is already present because applying a silicone finish over a fluorochemical finish reduces or eliminates the effectiveness of the original fluorochemical finish for repelling oil-and water-borne soils and stains.

Important: Be sure to check specific fabric warranties of each manufacturer before adding any treatment to a fabric! Manufacturers' recommendations differ in regard to applying additional finishes or in-home protective treatments. Some warranties may be voided if an additional finish or treatment is applied by someone other than the manufacturer. Also

avoid spraying or adding any treatments such as bactericides, biocides, fungicides or soil resistors not approved by the manufacturer.

- More Quality Checkpoints -

Tips About Tailoring...

Look closely at the tailoring details used on upholstered furniture. Check these areas:

- Grain line of fabrics should be straight vertically and horizontally.
- Pattern or fabric design should be centered or carefully placed on each section so that all parts match. Line of weave should be parallel with construction lines.
- There should be no loose threads, wrinkles, puckers or lumps.
- Any staples or tacks should be well concealed.
- Seams should be securely stitched with matching thread.
- Seams and welting cord should be straight and even.
- Covers and cushions should be smooth, and cushions should fit snugly into corners.
- Skirts should be straight, even and pleated or gathered neatly. They should have an inner lining for durability and appearance.
- Quilting, tufting, channeling and shirring should be evenly spaced and of equal depth throughout.
- Buttons should be straight and evenly pulled.
- Arm cover protectors should be provided.

Focus On Fit...

Sit on the upholstered piece. It should be sturdy, comfortable and fit your body. If you will not be using the piece, it should fit the person who will be using it. The seat must be wide enough and deep enough for the user. The arm rests must be a comfortable height when you are seated. The back shape and height must also fit, and feet should reach the floor. The piece you select should fit the purpose for which it is intended.

On The Move...

Motion furniture is promoted widely and is popular with consumers. Be sure to test the mechanism as you are shopping. Does it glide smoothly and easily? Is it noiseless? Do sofa beds pull in and out smoothly and without effort or adjustment?

Hang Tag Helps...

Be sure to read all hang tags and labels. They give helpful information about the furniture and the manufacturer. Upholstered furniture does not have to be labeled as to fiber content. However, if the manufacturer does label the piece, any fiber content of five percent or more must be on the label. Some labels give information about wood finishes and recommended care. Check for any warranties and guarantees. Be sure that you understand what is covered and what is not.

Many furniture manufacturers participate in a voluntary program in which they produce upholstered furniture with a higher resistance to fire. These manufacturers label their

furniture with a special tag bearing the initials UFAC (Upholstered Furniture Action Council) and a brief explanation of their program. If you are a smoker or heat your home with wood or coal, you might want to consider purchasing furniture having high resistance to fire.

Another familiar label required by law in most states concerns the fillings used in the furniture. It states those materials used to pad the frame and fill all cushions. Those with allergies may find this information helpful.

Fabric Care Information Codes

- W**..... Water-based cleaner can be used.
- S**..... Solvent cleaning agent is to be used.
- S-W**..... Water-based cleaner or solvent can be used.
- X**..... Vacuum only. **DO NOT CLEAN** with either water or solvent.

A label often seen on upholstered furniture tells about the type of care advised for the outer fabric covering. There are four special codes which call for different methods of spot cleaning: W, S, S-W and X. If removing a spot or stain, follow these code guidelines and always pre-test any cleaning agent in an inconspicuous area of the furniture.

Your upholstered furniture should give many years of service. Follow these guidelines to keep it looking its best:

- Vacuum or brush weekly to remove soil and prevent hidden dirt between fibers from causing wear.
- Reverse or rotate cushions to even wear and help cushions retain their shape.
- Use protective arm covers in matching upholstery fabric to prevent soiling and early wear.
- Avoid placing upholstered furniture in constant direct sunlight or near heating outlets since this can cause fading or discoloration.
- Blot up spills immediately with a clean, dry cloth.

References:

- "Recipe For Furniture Buying." National Association of Furniture Manufacturers, Washington, D.C.
- "When You Buy Upholstered Furniture." Southern Furniture Manufacturer Association, High Point, N.C.
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