



IF YOU DON'T SNOOZE, YOU LOSE

Before you buy, it pays to spend time on the ticking. Take 15 minutes and lie on the mattress in your usual sleeping positions.

CR INVESTIGATES

How to buy a mattress without losing sleep

Shopping for a mattress can be a nightmare. In fact, CONSUMER REPORTS receives more inquiries about mattresses (3,300 since 2001) than about any other product except cars.

The reason is that shoppers are flying blind. It's hard to tell one box of metal, foam, fuzz, and fabric from another, making you vulnerable to a sales pitch. Model names differ from store to store, making it impossible to comparison shop. And prices vary so much that the \$1,300 mattress set you look at one day can cost \$2,600 the next. We know; that happened to us.

To explode mattress misconceptions and expose what many retailers don't want you to know, CONSUMER REPORTS shopped in all kinds of stores, interviewed mattress makers, and polled visitors to our Web site, ConsumerReports.org, about their buying experiences. We hired two retired industry insiders, with a combined 87 years of experience, to tear apart 18 beds from Sealy, Serta, Simmons, and Spring Air, the top-selling brands. Our ob-

jective: to point out differences among low- and high-priced models.

We recruited 59 staff members to visit our own "store" to try out beds you've probably heard about on TV or radio: Duxiana, Select Comfort, and Tempur-Pedic. We also asked four couples to take those mattresses home and sleep on each for a month. Our unique research has resulted in a wealth of information that can help you choose the bed of your dreams.

The one thing we can't do is tell you precisely what bed that is. We know from years of bashing and dissecting that all but the cheapest mattresses are apt to be sturdy, but there are no reliability data for specific models or even brands. A retailer we interviewed confided that no brand is less trouble prone than another. Industrywide, less than 1 percent of mattresses are returned for warranty failures such as broken

CR Quick Take

Months of shopping, testing, and investigation revealed the following:

- **Despite the claims, there is no best bed for everyone. You'll need to spend time finding the mattress that's most comfortable and supportive for you.**
- **Trying a mattress for 15 minutes in a store can predict long-term satisfaction.**
- **Although Duxiana, Select Comfort, and Tempur-Pedic beds cost \$1,500-plus and promise great comfort, our real-world tests showed they aren't to everyone's liking.**
- **The cheap mattresses featured in flyers are apt to be less durable than others; their padding may be so thin that you feel the springs.**
- **Sales are frequent, discounts are steep, and no one should pay list price for a conventional innerspring mattress. If you wait for a sale, you can save hundreds or more.**

springs. Furthermore, comfort is relative. To reach a consensus would take a panel of thousands, and the results still wouldn't speak to your own preferences. That said, this is a how-to-buy guide you'll find nowhere else.

First, a primer on how mattresses have changed in recent years.

NEWS AND TRENDS

Consumers are buying bigger beds.

Queen is the most widely sold size; kings account for nearly 10 percent of the market. Many mattresses are almost twice as thick as they were a decade ago—up to 20 inches. They're also heavier, but most have cushioning on the top only, so manufacturers no longer suggest that you flip them. (It's still a good idea to rotate most from front to back to even out wear.) Among major brands, only Serta continues to make some two-sided mattresses.

It would seem that a bed with one sleep surface would last half as long. But manufacturers and others in the industry contend—and our consultants agree—that quality has risen since our last report, in 1997. Mattress makers are using more foam, including latex and visco-elastic “memory foam,” which make for body-hugging, longer-lasting padding, and less polyester fiber, which tends to pack down. Other real improvements include stain resistance. Serta's top-of-the-line Perfect Sleeper, for example, has stainproof yarns (it's the model with “Marquésa” technology). Simmons' stain-resistant Health-Smart mattress has a Teflon-coated, zippered top pad that is machine washable.

Prices are higher. Rising material costs are one reason for the hike, as are plush fabrics such as fancy damask, jersey knit, microsuede, wool, cashmere, and silk.

Another pricey innovation: the Euro-top, a separate layer of padding sewn tightly onto a mattress. Eurotops differ from older pillowtops, cushy pads sewn loosely atop a mattress. In our previous test, pillowtops were easily compressed and apt to sag.

A new law enhances fire safety. In January, California required new mattresses sold there to pass a stricter test than required elsewhere in the U.S. For more on mattress-flammability standards and regulations, see Viewpoint, on page 61.

11 mattress myths

Although our reporter encountered fewer pitches than when he shopped for our 1997 mattress report, salespeople still disparaged certain products and tried to persuade him to buy a pricier mattress. In our online poll, 19 percent of innerspring-mattress owners complained about pressure to trade up to a costlier bed, and 15 percent said that the salesperson used a hard-sell approach. Below, the myths you may hear—as sales pitches or common wisdom—and the truth behind them.



1. FIRMER IS BETTER. The best bed is the one that's most comfortable to you. Medical experts we interviewed say there have been no well-controlled studies to indicate the best firmness overall.

2. COIL COUNT IS CRITICAL. Any number above 390 in a queen-size mattress should be plenty. Our consultants concluded that coils in all but the cheapest mattresses—less than about \$800 list price for a queen-size—are “overdesigned for their function” and ought to provide years of service for most people.

3. SILK, CASHMERE, AND WOOL MAKE A BED MORE COMFORTABLE. The small amounts usually used in the upper padding only make a bed more expensive. When you cover your mattress with a pad and sheets, you can't directly feel the surface anyway.

4. A HIGHER PRICE GUARANTEES A BETTER BED. Anything but the cheapest mattresses can be a fine choice. To find out how one \$700 twin mattress set compares with a \$1,400 set, see Dollars & Sense, on page 15.

5. IF YOU MOVE IN YOUR SLEEP, THE BED IS TO BLAME. Turning is normal; it's a problem only if it disrupts your sleep. The mattress may or may not be at fault.

6. A MATTRESS SHOULD BE USED UNTIL IT SAGS. Changes in the human body tend to make a mattress less comfortable long before it wears out.

7. YOU MUST INCLUDE A BOX SPRING, TO SAVE THE WARRANTY. Despite sales pressure to buy both mattress and foundation, it's not always required. Check with the store or company. You may be able to keep your old box spring, if it's in good shape.

8. WARRANTIES COVER A SAGGING MATTRESS. Manufacturers say a mattress can compress by as much as 1½ inches before it's considered defective.

9. STORES SELL THE SAME MATTRESS UNDER DIFFERENT NAMES. Retailers often claim that their mattress A is comparable to a competitor's mattress B. Though you may find beds that are truly alike, most “comparables” we bought had little in common.

10. SALESPEOPLE ARE ALWAYS OBJECTIVE. Manufacturers dangle financial incentives known as SPIFs (for “sales person incentive funds”) to push various brands and models. Commissions can amount to about \$100 a bed.

11. ALL BEDS ARE EQUALLY FIRE-RESISTANT. For now, Serta and Tempur-Pedic are the only major brands whose mattresses all comply with California's fire-safety mattress code, the strictest in the U.S. Other brands make some beds that adhere to the code, but there may be a surcharge of as much as \$200. Ask at the store.

How to choose

BEFORE YOU SHOP

Determine whether you need a new mattress. A mattress can last 10 years—if kids don't treat it like a trampoline. But by that time, you'll have logged roughly 30,000 hours in bed, and the mattress is likely to have become less comfortable and supportive. Think about buying a new mattress if:

- You wake up tired or achy.
- You tend to sleep better at hotels than at home.
- Your mattress looks saggy or lumpy.
- You're over age 40 and your mattress is five to seven years old. Bodies tolerate less pressure as they age.

Choose a size. Even healthy sleepers shift positions during the night,

and cramped quarters can keep them from moving freely. Mattress dimensions: king, 76x80 inches; California king, 72x84 inches; queen, 60x80 inches; full, a.k.a. double, 53x75 inches; twin, 38x75 inches.

Consider an innerspring first. A conventional innerspring mattress is the most common choice and often the least expensive. Memory foam, which was developed to protect astronauts against g-forces, is heat-sensitive and conforms to your body. Tempur-Pedic is the big name, but there are other brands. Not all memory foam feels the same, and it can take time to get used to. A third option: an inflatable mattress that lets you choose a different firmness for each half of the bed. Select Comfort is the major brand.

Decide where to shop. Buy at a store, not online or over the phone, unless you've already tried the identical mattress in a store. A product manager for Tempur-Pedic told us that online

customers typically return their mattresses at a higher rate than those who buy in a store.

Our reporter found that department stores have frequent sales and lots of brands, but he found them somewhat crowded, cluttered, and short on sales help. Bedding stores such as Sleepy's and 1-800-Mattress, and furniture stores such as Seaman's, offer plenty of variety and were often less crowded. Salespeople were more attentive and sometimes more willing to bargain. Company stores selling only Duxiana or Select Comfort provided especially good service. Employees can afford to take time with customers: Queen-size sets cost about \$4,000 to \$7,000 at Duxiana (there's no bargaining) and about \$900 to \$3,800 at Select Comfort (there are occasional sales).

The other specialty bed we tested, Tempur-Pedic, is sold at a variety of stores, but our reporter found that discounts were few and far between.

closeup

WHAT MATTERS MOST IN A MATTRESS, FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

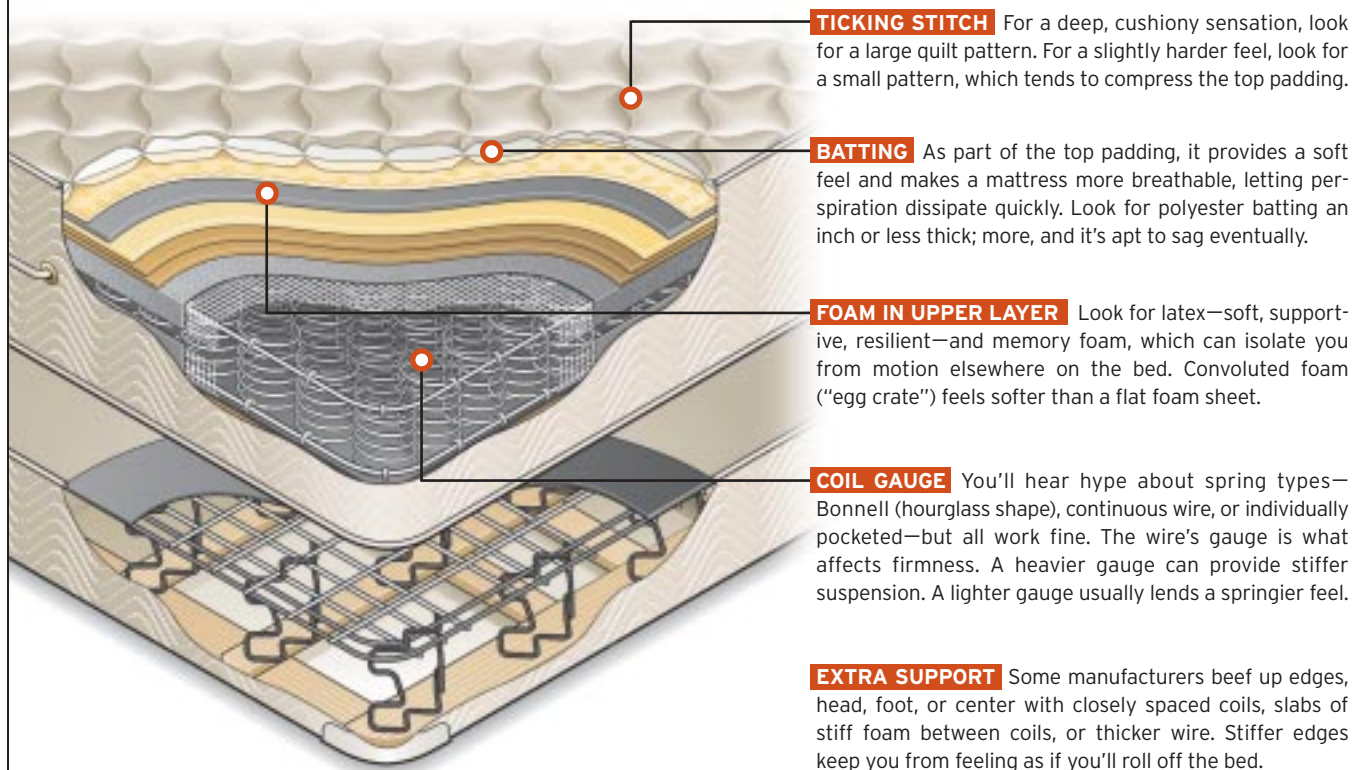


ILLUSTRATION BY JIM KOPP

WHEN YOU'RE IN THE STORE

Understand the name game. Manufacturers usually modify any innerspring mattress they make for different sellers, changing the color, padding, quilting pattern, and so forth. Then each seller can call the mattress by a different name. Consumers are the losers. Since such mattresses are at least somewhat different, and the names vary, you can't comparison-shop. (A big chain such as Sears or Bloomingdale's has the same model names for the same beds at all of its stores, but usually at the same price.)

Some bedmakers provide helpful information on their Web sites. Go to www.simmons.com, for example, and you'll uncover basics about the company's flagship Beautyrest lines, the Classic, World Class, and Exceptionale. You'll see those names wherever you find Beautyrest, and all beds in each line share attributes.



Choose the right firmness. Don't rely on names: Levels are described differently. One company's ultraplush might be another's supersoft. Orthopedists once recommended sleeping on an extremely firm mattress, but there's little evidence to support that view. The optimal surface is purely subjective, says Dr. Clete Kushida, director of the Stanford University Center for Human Sleep Research.

A study published in 2003 in the British medical journal *The Lancet* suggested that individuals who suffer from lower back pain would benefit from a medium-firm sleeping surface. That conclusion makes sense to several experts we interviewed. If a mattress is too firm, it won't support all body parts evenly and may cause discomfort at the heaviest points (hips and shoulders). If it's too soft, you could sink into the surface and have a hard time moving, which could cause tingling, numbness, or aches.

Dr. Alan Hedge, professor of ergonomics at Cornell University, noted that the best mattress supports your spine at all points while allowing it to maintain its natural curve. By age 40, Dr. Hedge said, skin loses elasticity and becomes more sensitive to pressure points, which argues for a softer, more cushiony surface as you age. "Slightly softer works better because there's less compression on the skin."

WHAT YOU GAIN FOR TWICE THE PRICE

Do the differences below make the Sapphire sparkle more brightly than the Ruby? You'd need to judge for yourself. Our consultants said the two mattresses were similar in firmness and overall comfort. They're sold with the same box spring. Prices are list, for a twin set.

SEALY POSTUREPEDIC RUBY LX CUSHION FIRM		SEALY POSTUREPEDIC SAPPHIRE LX FIRM	
			
\$700		\$1,400	
1 1/8 inches of polyurethane foam and polyester batting.	< QUILT FILL >	1 1/2 inches of polyurethane foam and polyester batting.	
Good-quality damask. 4x8-inch tight stitch pattern.	< TICKING >	Excellent damask; stretchy fabric on top. Open stitching for soft feel.	
2 inches of flat polyurethane foam.	< PADDING >	4 1/2 inches of egg-crate polyurethane; thin layers of flat and memory foam.	
580	< COILS >	660	

Do the 15-minute in-store test. Don't be embarrassed to lie down on lots of mattresses in the store. Salespeople expect it. Wear loose clothes, and shoes that you can slip off. Spend at least five minutes on each side and your back (your stomach, too, if that's a preferred position). Panelists who took beds home for a monthlong trial rarely changed the opinion they formed after the first night. On the whole, their opinions also tracked with those of our 15-minute testers.

Assess your need for a new box spring. Foundations can sell for as much as the mattress they're sold with, even though they're generally just a wood frame enclosing stiff wire and covered with fabric matching the mattress's.

We found that companies frequently pair the same foundation with mattresses in different price ranges. You might save by buying a higher-priced mattress with a lower-priced foundation. Once the bed is made, no one will know. If your current foundation is only a few years old, with no rips, warps, creaks, or "give," consider using it with a new mattress. If the old box has bouncy springs instead of stiff wire, it needs to be replaced.

If your new mattress is ultrathick,

consider pairing it with a "low profile" foundation, 4 to 6 inches thick.

Be wary of "comparables." If you like a mattress at one store and ask elsewhere for something similar, you're likely to be steered toward a same-brand mattress that's supposed to have the same construction, components, and firmness. It's unlikely. Manufacturers don't publish a directory of comparables. Retailers that claim to sell them, insiders say, generally snoop in competing stores and compile a list of beds that appear equivalent. But when we went to three bedding chains and asked for mattresses similar to those we'd bought at three department stores, five of the six mattresses were way off the mark. A two-sided bed, for instance, was said to be comparable to a one-sided bed.

Look for a comfort guarantee. Some businesses give you two weeks to several months to return or exchange a bed you don't like. Everyone plays by different rules, and the return usually costs you. At Bloomingdale's, you're encouraged to keep a bed for 30 days, then you have 7 days to return or exchange it, but you'll pay for delivery plus 10 percent of the price up to \$250. On the other hand, Sears doesn't charge for returns or exchanges

within 90 days. Specialty beds have their own rules, noted in the sidebar at right.

Don't count on warranties. They cover defects in materials and workmanship, not comfort or normal wear. They're typically in effect for 10 years; Duxiana, Select Comfort, and Tempur-Pedic are in effect for 20. Some warranties don't cover full replacement value; an annual usage charge is deducted from the current retail price.

When you make a claim, the store or manufacturer sends an inspector to your house. You'll need to show your receipt. If you say the bed has sagged, the inspector checks whether the dip is below the allowable limit, 1½ inches. A company will void a warranty if you remove the "do not remove" tag, if the mattress is soiled, or if it has uneven support from foundation or frame—a common reason, says Stan Steinreich, a Simmons spokesman.

Wait for a sale, and bargain. Specialty mattresses usually have a set price, but you can save at least 50 percent off list price for an innerspring type. Ads for "blowout" sales make such events seem rare. They aren't. If the price is good, buy; if not, wait. Our shopper spent \$1,300 more for a Serta Perfect Sleeper set at one Sears store than for the same set at another Sears a week later.

An advertised "bargain" may not be all it seems, so read the fine print. A Bloomingdale's flyer we saw touted 75 percent savings on mattresses, but a footnote revealed that the list price from which the discount was calculated "may not be based on actual sales."

Have options at several stores. If you're ready to shop elsewhere, you may score a discount. When our reporter asked a salesman at a 1-800-Mattress showroom if the company's Web site had a better deal, the salesman said he'd double the value of a \$100 Internet coupon if the bed was bought at the store.

Seal the deal. Ask about disposal of your old mattress (some deliverers bring it to the curb, others charge to cart it away). Insist on a no-substitutions clause in the sales agreement, in case the bed you ordered is out of stock. When it's delivered, look for damage, and request a replacement if necessary.

Free at ConsumerReports.org

Learn more about mattress anatomy and how to get a good night's sleep. Free from May 10 to July 6. Click on "Home & garden."



Duxiana vs. Select Comfort vs. Tempur-Pedic

Many of the estimated 70 million Americans who complain of sleeplessness have turned their backs on conventional innerspring beds and bought alternatives such as Duxiana (springs galore, in layers), Select Comfort (air-filled, with adjustable firmness for each partner), and Tempur-Pedic (polyurethane "memory foam"). The ads are gushing: Sportscenter Pat Summerall calls the Duxiana "the bed your back has been aching for"; Lindsay Wagner, TV's former Bionic Woman, lauds the Select Comfort Sleep Number bed as "the key to a perfect night's sleep"; and Tempur-Pedic's Web site is loaded with testimonials, including one from an owner who says the bed helped him kick pain pills.

To assess these beds, which cost \$1,500 and up—way up—in queen size, we asked four couples to spend a month using each at home. The beds come in several versions; testers slept on one. They scored overall comfort, sleep quality, and how likely they were to buy the bed if price weren't a factor. Another 59 staff members lay down for about 15 minutes on each bed (we hid brand names) in one of our labs, the way you should try mattresses in a store. Finally, we asked visitors to ConsumerReports.org about recent mattress-buying experiences. Results are on the facing page. Mattresses are in alphabetical order. Prices are what we paid, before tax, for the set we tested.

DOES \$1,500+ BUY A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP?

Our experiment showed that spending more for a specialty mattress doesn't guarantee a happy sleeper. Panelists' opinions were all over the place: One person's "supportive and cushiony" was another's "feels like sleeping on wet or hard sand." Every pick or pan came with exceptions. Seven of eight panelists gave the Duxiana high marks for comfort, but none thought it worth the \$4,150 nonnegotiable price. Six of eight said they wouldn't buy the basic version of the Select Comfort Sleep Number 5000 on which they slept, but when they tried a pillowtop version, most liked it better.

Often, opinions formed after the first night on a bed held up over time. But even here, there were exceptions. Half of our sleepers liked the Tempur-Pedic less the longer they slept on it. (After we asked five other people who had liked that mattress in our lab to sleep on it for a month, however, four still liked it enough to consider buying it.)

Our informal online poll indicated that specialty mattresses may be worth a try: Only half of the 500 or so people who owned conventional innerspring mattresses were very or completely satisfied with them; one-third of innerspring owners found their beds less comfortable after they slept on them regularly. Owners of specialty mattresses seemed far happier. By contrast, more than two-thirds of the 231 Select Comfort owners and more than three-fourths of the 154 Tempur-Pedic owners were very or completely satisfied with their purchase. (Few respondents owned the Duxiana.)

Experiences of staff members who tried the beds briefly in our lab largely mirrored those of long-term panelists, with one exception: The short-term testers were more critical of the Duxiana.

The bottom line: For each of these beds, our panelists' opinions ran the gamut from aah to ick, which just reinforces the need for an in-store tryout.

DUXIANA 1001 WITH PASCAL SYSTEM

The bed: An innerspring foundation with two layers totaling 1,728 coils (in queen size)—roughly 1,000 more than in a conventional mattress. Upper-layer coils are more flexible than lower. There's also a top pad, which comes in different configurations. The pad we chose included foam and "Pascal" inserts, extra coils for support at torso, shoulders, and legs. (The current Pascal System is slightly different.) There's no box spring, so the bed is low (you can buy taller legs). It's made in Sweden. European labor costs, shipping, and furniture-quality wood help explain the price. So does the fact that the bed is sold only through boutique showrooms (33 across the U.S.). The price is nonnegotiable, and you can't return the bed if it's uncomfortable. Twenty-year limited warranty.

The claim: "No gimmicks, no tricks; an unbelievably supportive, comfortable and long-lasting bed, advanced by the most recent technology."

The comments: Panelists noted no "gimmicks" or "tricks," and some did praise its support and comfort. "Very comfortable and easy to get in and out of," one said. "Aches and stiffness got significantly better," another said. Others disagreed. "Soft, bouncy, squeaky; like a camp or dormitory mattress," one said.

The bottom line: On the whole, long-term testers liked it but thought it wasn't worth the price. Buy it only if your budget allows.



SELECT COMFORT SLEEP NUMBER 5000 BED

The bed: A two-chamber inflatable mattress, plus rigid platform, that lets users adjust firmness via a remote-controlled air pump. The remote's settings go from 5 to 100; higher numbers indicate a firmer surface. This basic version consists of foam edging and two air bags inside a zippered cover. There's only quilted ticking above the air chambers. You can test-drive the bed for 30 days. If dissatisfied, you can pay to return it yourself or have the company handle the return for \$199. Twenty-year limited warranty.

The claim: "Uniquely designed air chambers to provide a gentle cushion of support which can be easily adjusted to your preference for comfort and firmness. Allows couples to individually adjust each side of the bed to the precise comfort level each partner prefers."

The comments: Some praised its support, but many criticized the model they tried. "Difficult to find a good comfort setting," one said, and another noted that different comfort settings could make it feel "as if you're rolling up- or downhill to get from one side to another."

The bottom line: Six of eight long-term panelists said they probably wouldn't buy this model under any circumstances, but most users who tried the plusher pillowtop version (\$1,700) called it comfortable.



TEMPUR-PEDIC CLASSIC SWEDISH SLEEP SYSTEM

The bed: Eight-inch-thick memory foam paired with a box spring. Panelists noted that the mattress had a strong odor, possibly because the foam was packaged too quickly after manufacture, the company says. The odor lessened, but it lingered throughout the four-week trial. A company spokesman called the odor "a normal condition of the product" and said that it would dissipate. He added that Tempur-Pedic will replace the mattress if the odor remains bothersome. Buy directly from Tempur-Pedic and you'll get a 90- to 120-day trial, but you will pay \$159 to send the mattress back if it's uncomfortable. If you buy elsewhere, the store's comfort guarantee applies. Twenty-year limited warranty.

The claim: "The material seeks to know exactly how far to let you sink in so that every point on the contour of your body is supported."

The comments: One of our first set of long-term testers called it "supportive and cushiony," but most used different language: "not enough cushioning," "feels like sleeping on wet or hard sand," "pressure on hips and back." Most members of a second set of panelists who had liked the bed in our lab still liked it after a month.

The bottom line: It elicited stronger opinions, pro and con, than the other beds.



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