



In Search of a Green Night's Sleep

Ever snoozed on soy, rubber—or herbal tea? *Laura Fraser* goes on the hunt for a bed that's not bad for the planet.

OF ALL THE THINGS in my home that I've worried are bad for the environment, my mattress is one I'd never lost any sleep over. Until recently—after my linebacker-size boyfriend, Peter, moved in, and created a deep canyon on his side of the bed. I was waking up grumpy, with backaches from the strain of staying level. I'd bought the bed a decade before, shortly after my divorce. Now, with a new man in my life, I decided I was ready for a new mattress.

Around that time, I visited my parents and slept on their new pull-out couch. But instead

of peaceful slumber, it felt as if I were being gassed by the mattress's smell. I opened a window but tossed all night, worried about the toxic fumes I might be inhaling. Mattresses, I soon learned, are rarely ecologically innocent. Most are made with synthetic fibers or foam, which don't biodegrade. Cotton or wool stuffing can be processed with pesticides and other chemicals—some of them potentially carcinogenic. Considering I spend one-third of my life lying in bed, realizing this was fairly disquieting.

The good news is that choices once limited

to size and firmness now include environmental options as well. If you prefer an innerspring mattress—steel coils surrounded by layers of fluffy padding—you can rest easy on beds made from organic cotton and wool, with steel coils that aren't coated in chemicals. If, like me, you prefer a solid-foam mattress, you can opt for latex made from the milky sap of rubber trees. And though I worried that sleeping on something made from coconut husk fibers or natural rubber would feel like napping in Gilligan's hut, when I test-drove the beds, (continued on page 74)

(continued from page 72) my back couldn't feel the difference. Here are three tips from my eco-mattress hunt.

FOLLOW YOUR NOSE

The smell that kept me awake at my parents' house is a cocktail of chemicals, including volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which are associated with skin irritation and respiratory problems. Walter Bader, author of *Sleep Safe in a Toxic World* and cofounder of Organic Mattresses Inc., sent a conventional mattress to a lab that measured its emissions and found 61 VOCs. "Mattresses are like cigarettes were in the 1930s," Bader says. "Completely unregulated, and everyone thinks they're safe."

Experts, though, remain divided about what exposure levels pose a danger. Berkeley-based toxicologist Janet Weiss, MD, who has studied these chemicals, says, "Like the new-car smell, mattress smells aren't hazardous." Others argue that exposure should be as limited as possible. "Although the amount people inhale is incredibly small, the exposure adds up," says epidemiologist Devra Lee Davis, PhD, of the Environmental Health Trust.

Choosing organic materials is one of the best ways to cut the toxins you inhale while sleeping. Fumes are strongest in the first few weeks, so it also helps if you can let your new bed air out in a spare room or garage before using it.

ASK FOR THE REAL CREDENTIALS

There is no government certification for eco-friendly mattresses. "Manufacturers use the terms *green* and *natural* however they want, and there isn't much standardization," says Sonya Lunder, a senior analyst at the Environmental Working Group.

While shopping, I found mattresses made with castor oil, aloe vera, green-tea infusions, and bamboo—and labeled every variation of green, eco-, organic, and natural. It takes some sleuthing to push past the green stickers and figure out what really goes into a mattress. I tried out one "eco-friendly" memory-foam mattress in a store that was plastered with green leaf symbols. A salesperson offered me piping hot green tea, but when I pressed her on what was so green

about their mattress, she explained that more than 10 percent of the oils in the petroleum-based memory foam had been replaced with plant-based oils. So the product wasn't exactly green, just 10 percent greener. "We're the hybrid cars of the mattress world," she said. "We're still burning gas, but it's better than a regular car."

Yet to many shoppers, the company's beds appear just as pure as those made by rigorously green Organic Mattresses Inc., a company Bader started because of his chemical sensitivities (the handcrafted creations are made from cruelty-free wool, certified organic cotton, and 100 percent natural rubber latex in a facility where no one is allowed to smoke, wear fragrances, or use fabric softeners).

When shopping, ignore words like *eco* and *natural*. Instead, seek out companies that explain ingredients clearly and can point to where materials are sourced. Even better, look for third-party certification: Oeko-Tex Standard 100 is the largest voluntary third-party certification for textiles free of harmful substances, and Global Organic Textile Standard certifies that a natural fiber was grown organically and processed sustainably.

FIND A COMFORTABLE COMPROMISE

If I had a \$3,000 budget, I'd be on a virtuous mattress made by Organic Mattresses in a heartbeat. But there's only so much I can spend on my back health and eco-consciousness. I decided I wanted a memory-foam mattress that replaced some of the usual synthetic latex with soy. And after careful research, I bought it from Magniflex, an Italian company, because its bona fides were so impressive: Its memory foam is 30 percent plant oils, one of the highest percentages in the industry; it uses water to expand the memory foam rather than relying only on solvents, like most companies; and it created a flame retardant derived from sea sand, saving me from more chemical additives. The company's textiles are Oeko-Tex certified, and it uses GOTS-certified cotton.

When Peter and I lay down on the \$1,600 mattress, I knew I'd done what I could to make my bed more eco-friendly, and as a result, I sleep just fine. **E**

Laura Fraser's most recent book is *All Over the Map* (Broadway).

Your Eco-Bedding Primer

Bed linens can be covered in chemicals—even formaldehyde—to keep them shiny and unwrinkled. Consider these alternatives.

ORGANIC COTTON

Cotton production uses 16 percent of the world's insecticides, which can contaminate runoff and drinking water, so opt for organic cotton when you can. But if you want organic bedding, get used to wrinkles, warns Karyn Barsa, CEO of Coyuchi. "Anything wrinkle-free has added polyester or is coated with chemical resin," she says. Also skip superhigh thread counts: The thin threads may be strengthened with—you guessed it—more chemicals. Organic cotton, by contrast, simply softens over time, and generally lasts

longer. I have a Coyuchi comforter cover I bought eight years ago that feels like a grown-up baby blanket.

BAMBOO

"The benefit of bamboo is that it doesn't need to be irrigated," says Nancy Morgan, owner of Yala, which makes silky-smooth bamboo linens. But bamboo does have to be turned into fiber before it can be woven, which involves chemical additives. Yala is Oeko-Tex certified to be free of chemicals. Water used to wash out the chemicals is recycled (make sure the brand you're buying does the same).

WOOL

There's only one natural material that sleeps warm and cool, wards off dust mites, and stays wonderfully fluffy: wool. A lot of wool is imported from New Zealand or Australia, and shipping creates a big carbon footprint, so I opted for a domestic producer with strong eco-standards. Holy Lamb Organics sources wool from regional farmers and has a zero-waste policy—right down to composting for the community garden. Their mattress pads and comforters are cozy and clean-smelling, straight from the box. —L.F.