

Selecting Upholstered Furniture for Your Home

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Consumer Series | Housing

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Choosing upholstered furniture for your home can raise many questions and cause confusion. Upholstery fabrics have a wide range of quality and price. Be sure you know what you want from your upholstery before you buy.

Consider the amount and kind of use the piece of furniture will receive, the amount and kind of care you are willing to give for its upkeep, and the length of time you expect it to last. Begin your evaluation with the fiber content. If the manufacturer's tag does not show the fiber content, ask a salesperson to provide that information. Table 1 shows the properties of fibers used in upholstery fabrics.

Performance Requirements

Consumers generally assume that furniture will be durable and meet their expectations about maintenance and appearance. Some types of upholstery fabric are better suited to specific areas. Consider where and how a piece will be used. Furniture in high use areas (family rooms and kitchens) must be durable and easy to maintain. Elegant textiles with complex textures may be more suitable for low traffic areas such as formal living rooms.

Choose upholstered furniture by evaluating the quality of furniture available in your price range. Be aware of the performance requirements for your needs and identify the criteria most important to you.

Perhaps the biggest advance in recliner styling is the wider choice of fabric and leather coverings. No longer relegated to bullet-proof synthetics, recliners are freely dressed in natural fibers, such as brushed cotton and denim, or sophisticated textures, such as velvet, tapestry, and leather. Invisible stain-guard treatments help remove some of the worry from these more delicate fabrics.

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Distressed leathers and washed chenilles give a softly aged look. Some manufacturers are even offering modified slipcover styles.

Health and Safety – Fire

Cigarettes are the most common cause of household fires. The Upholstered Furniture Action Council (UFAC) is a voluntary program designed by furniture manufacturers to promote guidelines and standards for flammability of upholstered furniture. Member firms display a UFAC hang tag on furniture telling consumers how their upholstery fabrics have been classified in flammability tests. Flame retardant finishes can be applied to cotton and rayon.

Durability

Appearance Retention

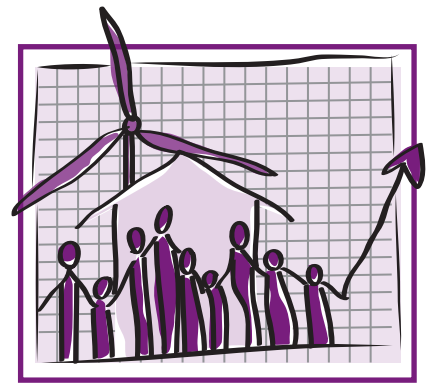
How well upholstered furniture will wear depends on the fiber, fabric, color application, finish, color fastness, and dimensional stability.

Fiber

Fibers and their characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Complex or fancy yarns of any fiber type may snag and break with abrasion.

Fabric

Upholstery fabric must be firmly woven. If fabric samples are available, hold the fabric up to the light. Is it compact? Closely woven? Examine the raw edges of the fabric. Do they fray or ravel easily? If so, yarns will shift and pull away at the seams, particularly in cushions and where upholstery fabric is attached to a sofa or chair frame. Stretch the fabric diagonally. Does it stretch and then completely recover? If it does, it will hold its shape without wrinkling.



Quick Facts

Before you purchase a piece of furniture, consider:

- How much and what kind of use will it receive?
- How much care does it need and how much are you willing to give for its upkeep?
- How long do you want it to last?

Begin your evaluation of upholstered furniture by considering the fiber content.

Also consider quality, price, comfort, style and color.

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Table 1. Properties of fibers used in upholstery fabrics.

Fiber	Properties	
Wool	Natural fiber from sheep, highly crimped	Excellent hand, high resiliency, attacked by moths, fair abrasion resistance, poor sunlight resistance, burns slowly, self-extinguishes in flames, requires dry cleaning
Cotton	Natural plant fiber used for centuries	Excellent absorbency, resistant to moths, dyes well, wrinkles easily, moderate abrasion resistance, moderate sunlight resistance, extremely flammable unless treated, easy to care for
Rayon	Manufactured fiber made from wood chips	Inexpensive, good hand, may shrink or stretch when wet, poor abrasion resistance, moderate sunlight resistance, resistant to moths and mildew, extremely flammable unless treated with a flame retardant finish, requires dry cleaning
Nylon	First synthetic fiber, produced in 1928	Resilient, excellent abrasion resistance, poor sunlight resistance, burns slowly with melting, easy care and maintenance
Polyester	Synthetic fiber favored in blends to add dimensional stability	Excellent resiliency, resistant to insects and mildew, good abrasion resistance, good sunlight resistance, burns slowly with melting, resists waterborne stains
Acrylic	Synthetic fiber famous for wool-like feel	Moderate resiliency, attractive hand, moderate abrasion resistance, excellent sunlight resistance, burns with melting, easy care
Olefin	One of the more recently developed synthetic fibers	Inexpensive, extremely heat sensitive, resistant to chemicals and insects, excellent abrasion resistance, poor sunlight resistance, burns with melting, resists waterborne stains
Leather	Processed hides and skins from animals	Excellent hand, durable, varies in quality, requires special care in cleaning, self-extinguishes in flames

A balanced weave, where all yarns are about the same size and strength, wears better than one with heavy yarns in one direction and thin yarns in the other. A twill weave resists wear and shows soil less than a plain weave of similar quality.

Flat-surfaced fabrics like damask, brocade, and satin show the effects of abrasion because the long yarns on the surface are subject to wear. Pile fabrics, like frieze, plush, and velvet, withstand abrasion quite well if they are made of firm yarns with deep and close pile and firmly held to the ground cloth. A pile fabric with cut loops mats more easily than one with uncut loops.

A latex backing often is applied to upholstery fabrics to help stabilize them. The latex forms a coating that helps keep soil from sifting through. It prevents seam slippage and makes precise cutting possible. Loosely woven fabrics should have an applied backing to ensure stability and longer wear.

Color Application

Pigment-printed fabrics may show color loss from abrasion. If you have a sample of the fabric, rub it 20 to 30 times with an emery board. Does the color change or rub off?

Finish

Easy care and stain-resistant finishes allow water-based stains to be easily blotted up. Scotchgard® by the 3-M Company, and Teflon® and Zepel® by DuPont are examples of stain-resistant finishes. Some finishes of this type, however, may retain oily soil.

Ask for information about the type of finish that the manufacturer has applied. Is the finish durable? Is it covered in the warranty?

Colorfastness

Colorfastness is the ability of fabrics to withstand color changes due to sunlight, abrasion, chemicals, and cleaning. Ultraviolet light can seriously damage textiles by increasing fading and by causing deterioration of fibers. Do not put upholstered furniture in intense sunlight for long periods. If this is not possible, choose fibers that withstand sunlight and consider window treatments that filter light.

Test fabrics for color loss by applying any chemicals or cleaning agents in an unobtrusive area before using them. Use a clean, white cloth so that you can see if color is transferred.

Dimensional Stability

Dimensional stability refers to a textile's ability to resist shrinking or sagging. Loose weaves may become distorted or sag over time. Use appropriate care methods to prevent shrinkage.

Quality

Read all labels. Note and compare prices. Price alone is not a true guide to quality. A less expensive fabric might serve your purpose as well or better than a more costly one. Study the hang tags, labels, and information imprinted on fabric selvages, if samples are available. Labels should specify whether a fabric is colorfast to light, cleaning, or abrasion.

The label may have a number or letter that indicates fabric classification. The less expensive fabrics usually are labeled with low numbers or the first letters of the alphabet. For example, "11" would indicate a more expensive fabric than "4" and "K" a more expensive fabric than "D."

Indicators of quality for upholstered furniture also include:

- strong, stable frames that cannot be felt from the outside
- straight application of fabric on grain
- matched patterns
- straight, strong seams
- secure buttons
- joints closely fitted, dowelled, screwed, and glued
- arms reinforced with metal where they meet the seat frame
- closely-woven internal webbing, securely tacked
- double coil springs, tied securely
- firm rolls of padding on sharp areas of frame

Shopping for Upholstered Furniture

Shopping for upholstered furniture should be done carefully but you should also enjoy the process. Start by asking about the frame. Is it kiln dried hardwood, layered hardwood, engineered wood, or a softwood product? Hardwoods like oak, alder, birch, ash, hickory and maple, layered hardwoods (plywood), and engineered woods (polymer reinforced composites) have tight grains and hold screws and nails well.

Maintenance

Cleanability codes are listed on furniture tags to assist consumers with appropriate care. Since the dyes or backings on some upholstery fabrics will be affected by water or spot cleaners, the cleanability code tells which cleaning method is safest for your fabric. If your furniture is not coded, test the fabric for damage or color change on a hidden part of the furniture before spot cleaning. The code is as follows:

(W): Use only water-based cleaning agents or foam. Mix two tablespoons of ammonia or ammoniated detergent to a quart of water. Wipe the stain gently with a cloth dampened with the solution. Continue turning the cloth so you are always using a clean portion.

(S): Use only mild, pure, water-free dry cleaning solvent. Wet a cloth with the spot cleaner and follow the same procedure as described above.

(WS): Either of the above methods may be used.

(X): Clean fabric only by vacuuming or light brushing to remove soil. Do not use liquid cleaning agents of any type.

Blot up stains as quickly as possible. Do not rub. Prompt attention to stains increases success in removing them. Even stain-resistant finishes offer only temporary protection. The furniture industry recommends professional cleaning when overall cleaning is necessary. The cleanability code should be called to the attention of your professional cleaner. A part of the instruction for each code designation is Caution: Never remove cushion covers for separate dry cleaning or washing. Any cleaning method that requires the removal of the covers from the cushions can destroy the backing, shrink, or otherwise damage upholstery fabric.

Look for joints that are reinforced with blocks or dowels or mortise and tenon joints. High-end furniture often has corner blocks that have been glued and/or screwed for added strength. Look for a minimum number of joints – fewer joints mean fewer chances for failure. Today's advanced manufacturing technology allows many joints to be eliminated by use of computer numerically controlled routing equipment. Most pieces are now stapled or galvanized nail strips with multiple points of attachment used to provide very durable fastening.

If there is exposed wood (arms or legs) check the finish quality by running your fingers underneath the arms and around the legs. The finish should be smooth to the touch. Legs should either be an extension of the frame, screwed in place, or doweled and glued.

Furniture cushioning affects comfort and durability. Cushions may contain flexible polyurethane foam, layers of polyester fiber batting, down and/or feathers and combinations of these materials. Sometimes individually pocketed steel coils are encased within the foam cushion to provide an extra level of support.

Polyurethane foam cushioning has the ability to provide long service life when it meets industry-accepted criteria. With conventional polyurethane foam, a density (the weight of one cubic foot of foam) of 1.8 pounds or more is usually adequate.

Polyester fiber is often used on its own or in combination with polyurethane foam or other cushioning materials. While polyester fiber can provide a gentle surface feel, the initial feel often changes or disappears quickly as fibers compact.

Cotton batting is rarely used in traditional seat cushions, but can be found in futons as a dual-purpose mattress and cushion. Cotton batting is difficult to work with because it tends to compact and change shape. Cotton can quickly show signs of uneven wear. If you select an all-cotton futon mattress/cushion be sure if it is tufted, so you will be able to add extra cotton fill as necessary to help maintain the mattress shape.

Goose down as well as goose and duck feathers are sometimes used in higher-

end cushioning. Goose down has more interlocking fiber and air content than feathers so it can retain shape better than feathers alone. Down and feathers tend to compact and the stuffing may shift or lump up as weight is applied. It may be necessary to fluff a down cushion to regain original looks.

Back cavities are often filled with loose fiber. With this type of construction, back-fill can settle or compact. A better solution is compartmentalized back construction, where vertical bags of filling are used to reduce compacting and migration. The best approach is to find a foam filled back. No matter the construction, it is important that the cushioning be evenly distributed and is capable of concealing the feel of the springs and frame.

Fabric choice is your chance to express your preferences in color, patterns, and textures. Fabrics with tight weaves and durable fibers like polypropylene or nylon typically stand up to the most active use. More formal fabrics like satins, brocades, or damasks are best reserved for seating where practicality is less of a concern. Fabrics that have a pattern woven in tend to resist wear better than those that have a printed pattern.

In the showroom, test the fabric for strength. Unzip the cushion, reach in and try pulling the fabric sample in different directions. The material should not separate. Run a fingernail over the fabric face. The fabric should not separate or show signs of abrasion. Take plenty of time to sit on a sofa or chair. Some seating characteristics take a few minutes to detect.

You can quickly note any imperfections and defects by making these easy checks:

- check the seams and corners for unwanted tucks or dimples
- check for rips and snags that can be caused by pulling the covering too tightly
- check the corners and edges; if you feel the frame within, the cover or padding may wear out prematurely
- ensure that the fabric patterns and decorative embroidery match, and are centered and evenly spaced
- make sure the nap of velvet fabric is oriented consistently in the same direction

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