

Los Angeles Times

Thursday, May 3, 2007

©2007 L.A. TIMES

HOME

EQUIPPED

Memory foam mattress? That's so last night

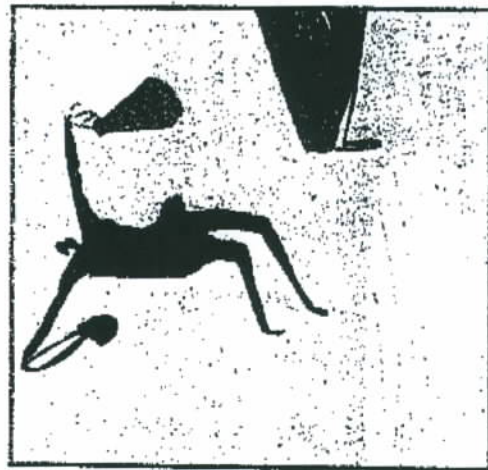
High-end materials such as latex and gel are revolutionizing the bed. As for the prices, well, hang on to your pillows.

By ANNE COLBY
Times Staff Writer

If it's been a year or two since you've shopped for a mattress, you're in for some surprises. That memory foam bed that once seemed so novel? It's now decidedly mainstream. Latex is the hot material of choice. And that's not all that's changed.

Choices are multiplying — especially on the luxury end — and prices are too.

Today, along with the traditional innersprings, you'll find a growing selection of specialty mattresses made of hypoallergenic latex foam, gel, organic wool



LARA HARWOOD FOR THE TIMES

and cotton, even magnets (for fans of magnet therapy), not to mention the viscoelastic memory foam and adjustable air chambers that already have garnered so much attention. Many of these command \$1,500 to \$4,000 for a queen.

Manufacturers also are tucking layers of pricey latex or memory foam into their traditional innerspring lines, creating plush hybrid models. Yes, hybrid beds.

"It used to be rock-hard beds sold a lot," says Larry Miller, cofounder and president of Sit 'n Sleep, which has 18 mega-stores in Southern California. "Today we're selling a lot of plush beds with support, a lot of latex, a lot of memory foam, a lot of air products and new types of innersprings with latex or memory foam, or a combination of foams."

In 2001, 1 in 7 mattresses sold for \$1,000 or more, according to the International Sleep Products Assn. By 2005, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the number had [See *Mattress*, Page F4]

LOS ANGELES TIMES

HOME

EQUIPPED

Choices, prices. Sleep on it.

[Mattress, from Page F1]
risen to more than 1 in 5.

Two trends are converging: advancements in mattress technologies and the aging of baby boomers who are willing to spend money on premium products.

"Around age 50, your body really starts to change in regard to sensitivity to pressure points," says Consumer Reports senior editor Tod Marks, who headed up the magazine's most recent report on mattresses. Changes can even be felt at age 40, he says. "That mattress you found comfortable 10 years ago may no longer be so comfortable. You may want more padding on top."

Doctors and bedding professionals used to think that a firm mattress was best for the back. Not anymore. Today, a combination of support and comfort is thought to be ideal — whatever feels best to each person. And what feels best to many people, especially as they get older, is a mattress with a little "give." That's where specialty beds come in.

Viscoelastic and latex foam conform to the body's curves, absorb motion and ease pressure points at the shoulders and hips. Many in the mattress industry are especially excited about latex, which is pleasantly

springy and feels cooler than memory foam. It also is naturally hypoallergenic and dust-mite resistant. "One of the reasons it's catching on is it's the best of both worlds," says Sealy spokesman David Mullen. Latex "reacts more like an inner-spring, it reduces pressure points, and it gives you individual support."

Another material showing up in more beds this year: stretchy gel. Mattresses with gel layers (think Dr. Scholl's shoe insoles) are said to distribute weight evenly and provide the comfort benefits of foam.

Then you have air beds (often with dual controls to suit each sleeper's level of comfort), and organic mattresses of hand-tufted wool and cotton, which can be softly supportive and naturally ventilating.

These specialty beds were introduced and championed by smaller, independent mattress makers, some of which have become quite successful. Tempur-Pedic rolled out its memory foam beds in the early '90s; today it's the fourth-largest mattress producer in the U.S., after Sealy, Simmons and Serta and ahead of Spring Air, according to Furniture/Today magazine. Select Comfort, which makes adjustable air mattresses, is No. 6.

Specialty mattresses in 2005 accounted for almost 10% of the beds sold and 22% of the dollars spent on beds, an increase of nearly 30% from the previous year, according to the sleep-products association.

"My guess is that eventually they'll be half the market," Sit 'n Sleep's Miller says. "As baby boomers grow older, they are more sensitive to the things these beds address."

Mainstream mattress makers have jumped in too. Sealy introduced latex, memory foam and adjustable air product lines, and the company reported a near-doubling of its specialty-mattress sales in 2006. Last year it opened its own latex manufacturing plant. Simmons has latex, memory foam and adjustable air too, as well as gel layers. Serta offers memory foam and latex beds.

But it's not all about health in these premium beds. You'll find silk, cashmere and alpaca fillings, pewter and brass hardware, ticking made of Belgian damask or woven with metallic thread. Vera Wang's Bridal Bed, introduced by Serta last year, weaves in holographic thread for a luminescent effect inspired by her wedding dresses. Italy's Magniflex, which is set to open a Manhattan showroom this month, sells a 22-karat-

gold-covered mattress for \$24,000, with a matching \$1,000 gold pillow.

And then there's Hästens, a Swedish manufacturer with showrooms at the old Helms Bakery complex in Culver City and at Newport Beach's Fashion Island shopping center. It offers a \$60,000 mattress set handmade with horsehair, cotton, linen, wool and flax. Sleeping on it is said to be like resting on a cloud.

But for those whose wallets are decidedly earthbound, is a premium mattress worth \$2,000 — not to mention \$60,000? Do you really sleep better?

Industry experts say that's a question only you can answer. Some people find the basic Innerspring mattresses are just as comfortable as the more expensive models. Others love the give of a memory foam bed, the cushioned support of a Euro-top innerspring or the good-for-you aura of an organic natural-fiber mattress. And they are willing to pay more to get it.

"There's no one mattress that's right for everybody, in terms of comfort and support and affordability," says Nancy Shark, executive director of the Better Sleep Council. "It's a personal preference."

anne.colby@latimes.com