

Snuggling In: What Makes Us Comfortable When We Sleep?

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What makes us feel comfortable when we snuggle in for a good night of sleep? There are several interesting distinctions regarding the marketing of beds, blankets and pillows. Some advertisements about Beds acknowledge that sleepers differ in what they want in their sleep environment. Some like the bed hot and others like it cold. Goldilocks lives! Some like hard pillows and others like soft pillows. Some like a cluster of billows of all shapes and sizes; others like just one “perfect” pillow of the right size, shape and amount of softness. Even sheets come with advocates of silk, cotton, flannel – and breathability. If nothing else, these ads encourage us to think about and identify some of our sleep environment preferences – but not all of them.

In this essay, I continue my report on the preferences noted by our Pathways to Sleep survey respondents to many elements of the sleep environment, including bed, sheets, blankets and pillows. As we have found, some of the other elements of the environment have as great or even greater an impact than the heavily marketed elements – and they cost much less (or are free to us).

As I have done in previous essays in this series on quality sleep, I provide some suggestions in this essay about the sleep environment and begin by offering a chart summarizing findings from my *Pathways to Sleep* project. This chart lists some of the sleep environment pathways, as well as ratings by experts and users, as well as costs and accessibility. In each case, a rating of “3” is high and a rating of “1” is low. A “v” indicates that this pathway is controversial (wide variation in ratings—high variance score).

Component Three B: Sleeping Environment

Pathway	Sub-Pathway	Expert Rating	User Rating	User Cost	User Access
Teeth and Jaw Alignment (Over-the Counter)		1.50	1.75	2	1
Teeth and Jaw Alignment (Custom Made: Dentist)		2.75	2.50	3	3
Comfortable Bed	Adjustable: Variable Softness	2	2.75	3	2
Comfortable Bed	Multiple Layers	1.50	2.75	3	2
Comfortable Bed	Adjustable Angle(s)	1.75	2.25v	3	2

Configuration of Bed	Length	2	2.75	3	2
Configuration of Bed	Width (Single, Double, Queen, King, Super King)	2.50	2.75	3	2
Comfortable Pillow(s)		1.75	3	2.25	1.50
Configuration of Pillows	Number of Pillows on the bed (including side pillows)	1.50	2.75	2.50	1.50
Configuration of Pillows	Diversity of Pillows on the bed (size, softness, shape) or Sleep Pod	1.50	2.75	2.50	1.50
Comfortable Sheets	Thread Count	1.50	2.75	2.25	1.50
Comfortable Sheets	Texture/ Composition (e.g. Silk, flannel, cotton, mixed)	1.50	2.75	2.5	1.50
Comfortable Sheets	Ventilation	1.50	2.75	2.50	1.50
Sleeping Position (Relates to breathing, snoring, muscular tension)	Frequent Change in Position	2	2.50	1	1
Sleeping Position (Relates to breathing, snoring, muscular tension)	Lying on your Back	2	2.25	1	1
Sleeping Position (Relates to breathing, snoring, muscular tension)	Lying on your Side	2	2.50	1	1
Sleeping Position (Relates to breathing, snoring, muscular tension)	Lying on your Belly	1.25	1.75v	1	1

While I want to comment on the ratings receiving from the Pathways to Sleep survey and from review of specific Pathway products (with regard to expert ratings, cost and access), I also want to introduce additional perspectives regarding the experience of creating optimal conditions for sleep. I have organized this presentation regarding the sleep environment around two pathway clusters: (1) bed and beyond, and (2) breath and position.

Cluster One: Bed and Beyond

We are ready for sleep. The lights have been turned down (or off). The room is made silent and is of the right temperature. We have prepared thoughtfully for sleep and are now ready to snuggle in for a good night of sleep. What awaits us? It is our bed and several accessories to this bed—specifically sheets, blankets and pillows. These all can make a big difference when it comes to experiencing high quality sleep. I first consider the bed.

Bed

Here is where a lot of money is involved – both in the amount invested in the advertisement and the amount one can spend on the purchase of a bed. Several factors need to be taken into account—some of these factors have been around for a long time while others have emerged in recent years with advances in bed-based technologies. First, there are the long-standing factors. How big of a bed do you want?

The size mostly concerns width (though beds also can be purchased that are of different lengths). Twin beds (38” wide by 75’ in length) are for the single sleeper (and often the younger sleeper), with the twin XL being a bit longer (38” x 80”). The Full-size bed is 54” by 75” and the queen size bed is both wider (“60”) and longer (“80”). These two sizes are for the single adult sleeper or sleep partners who really like to sleep close together (the younger couple?). Then we have California King (72” x 84”) and the standard King size (76” x 80”) beds. Beds can come in even larger sizes—especially those with multi-layer mattresses. The price, of course, goes up with the increase in size.

Sheets

While sheets are not a big thing for most of the experts (and don’t get much attention in list of sleep quality recommendations), they are rated quite important by our raters. The importance of sheets is quite understandable given that this is the most “intimate” feature of the bedroom environment—it is what touches our skin as we settle in for a good night of sleep. There are several factors to consider in the choice of sheets. Obviously, there is the matter of comfort (which usually concerns softness of the sheet). Thread count is often introduced at this point, though some sleep experts dispute the importance of this count. Nevertheless, for some sleepers a thread-count of 300 (or even up to 500 is important). Sheets made of silk or a satin fabric might be at the top of a sleeper’s list.

Then there is the matter of temperature control. Some of the most persuasive ads for sheets focus on temperature. These ads either tout the fact that their sheets leave the sleeper very cool, or they tout the capacity of their sheets to “breathe” --though it should be remembered that most people add one or more blankets on top of their sheets which makes the breathability of the sheets somewhat moot. Some people like to change their sheets depending on the time of year. Flannel sheets in the Winter and cotton sheets in the Summer. For other folks it is all a matter of universal “feel-good” regardless of the time of year. Silk sheets are preferred year around—or it is those wonderful bamboo sheets that are now being touted.

In recent years, attention has also been given to the health-base status of the sheet. Is it hypoallergenic and anti-bacterial. Cotton sheets are often dismissed as being too vulnerable to bacteria. Bamboo sheets are being touted as the healthiest of sheets. An alternative to the selection of healthy-sheets is the engagement in healthy practices regarding the washing and drying of the sheets. There is also good reason for advocating drying sheets out on a clothes line. This old-fashion practice not only is good for the environment (fewer watts of power devoted to drying of the sheets) and produces fresh-smelling sheets that no artificial additive can duplicate—it also offers the natural disinfectant offered by the sun.

Finally, of course, there is the matter of cost and value. While sheets are certainly not the most expensive component of the bedroom environment, they can range widely in cost. One can always settle for cotton or even polyester sheets that are relatively inexpensive; however, given the intimacy of our sheets, it might be worth it to snuggle up against a fabric that is soft to the touch and inviting of a good night of sleep.

Blankets

This component of the bedroom environment is usually given less attention than even the sheets. We didn't even identify the blanket as an important sleep pathway. The blanket typically doesn't touch our skin (the sheet serving as an intermediary). In most cases, the only feature of the blanket to be considered is its thickness and capacity to hold in the heat of our body. At certain times of the year (and in certain climates) we want very light blankets (or no blankets at all covering us). At other times of the year (and in more temperate climates) a thick blanket is required or several blankets are placed over our sheet.

Then there is the matter of substituting a quilt for a blanket. The quilt is a "god-send" for some people (including myself). There is something about sinking into bed under a big, soft quilt that hovers on sinking into "heaven" for some of us quilt-lovers. There is, of course, a wide range in the cost and quality of quilts. Traditionally, the ultimate in quilts were filled with duck down. Most quilts today are not quite so "exotic" or expensive. There is also the matter of multi-layer quilts that have been hand sown and incorporates beautiful patterns and designs. While a traditional Rustic or Amish quilt might not yield a better night of sleep, it can serve as a source of delight while planning for sleep.

I should also mention the bed spread. This component typically has little to do with quality of sleep. However, like an Amish-made quilt, the bed spread can provide pre-sleep delight and obviously, can help "show off" a bedroom for visitors or those shooting pictures of our home for *Better Homes and Gardens* or some fancy Interior Design magazine. We probably should not overlook the appearance of a bedroom (including furniture, lightening, color of the walls and objects on shelves and bedtables) when considering how conducive a bedroom is to a good night of sleep. It truly is a matter of "bed and beyond" when it comes to this third (sleep environment) set of sleep pathways.

Pillows

This final complement to the bed in which we sleep was not given much attention until the past decade or so. There is a highly controversial purveyor of pillows (who has sunk much of the profit from sales of pillows into political campaigns). As in the case of the sheets, there is also the matter of marketing

pillows on the basis of their health-based properties. Most importantly, of course, there is the matter of comfort, fit and size. Pillows come in many sizes—including those that are as big and long as the sleeper themselves. Like the sheets we buy, pillows are filled with a wide variety of materials—some natural and some synthetic.

Traditionally, the natural material could be down or even a mixture of feathers. While these natural materials offer some risk of allergens, they still can provide one with an incredible experience of gentle support. There also are pillows filled with a natural material such as cotton or kapok, or a synthetic material such as a polyester microfiber, latex or rayon. Each of these materials comes with some benefits (often cost related) and with differing capacities to conform to the human head.

There is even an extreme version of this head-conforming capacity. Much as beds can be purchased that mold to the shape of the sleeper, pillows can be purchased that provide memory foam (also known as viscoelastic foam). The pillow changes shape in response to heat and pressure. Because of this trait, a memory foam pillow molds to a sleeper's head and neck for customized pressure relief and spinal support. While these "miracle" pillows provide the sleeper with maximum adjustability, there is something equivalent to be found in placing a soft, "gushy" pillow under your head that you can hold in any way that you want. And this soft pillow is much less expensive!

Then there is the matter of the pillow's shape. There are standard rectangular pillows, as well as pillows that are U-Shaped, triangle-shaped, wedge-shaped, and tube-shaped (bolsters). Some pillows are designed specifically to provide support for one's neck while other provide support for one's back (serving as a back-rest when reading in bed or watching TV.) Given that each of these shaped pillows comes in many different sizes, the variety from which one can choose is remarkably large. We should all be able to snuggle with a pillow made "just for us."

There is also the matter of number and arrangement of pillows. We devoted several pathways to these matters. Our attention to number and arrangement seemed to be important given the user ratings. We find in recent years, that many people love to surround themselves with several pillows of varying size (and even softness). Higher-end hotels are aware of this preference. They typically provide at least four pillows on each bed in their suites. The arrangement of multiple pillows sometimes substitutes for a sleeping partner or provides support for an aching back or stiff neck. A classic arrangement is one or two pillows located under one's head, and one or two long "body-pillows" located alongside one's full body. With this arrangement, one can sleep on their side with support from the body pillow as well as proper support of one's head.

As in the case of blankets and bedspreads, there are also pillows that are meant solely for decoration and serve primarily as pre-sleep sources of visual appreciation (and perhaps yield some relaxation such as a beautiful bedspread might elicit).

Cluster Two: Breath and Position

We are now ready to fall asleep. Sight and sound are fixed. The bed is ready—and inviting. So are the sheets, blankets and pillows. We lie down in bed and take a nice, long breath. But the breath isn't easy to take—at least not when we are breathing through our nose. It seems that our nose is stuffed up or very dry. We want to sneeze or we have to breathe through our mouth in order to take in air. Maybe this doesn't happen when we first lie down. We do fall asleep with air primarily coming through our nose. Then early in the night we wake up and find it hard to breathe or at least find that our mouth and throat are very dry. We get out of bed and find some water to drink by our bedside or in the kitchen refrigerator. This happens many times during the night—leading to a low-quality sleep.

Another scenario. We are lying down in bed and moving from side to side in order to figure out which is the most “comfortable” position for us. There is a bit of a dilemma. We love lying on our left side or our right wide; however, we are likely to stay awake in this position. When we flip over to the other side. It is not quite as pleasant—but we actually are more likely to fall asleep on this side. We might even find that we are more likely to snore when sleeping on one and/or are more likely to wake up frequently on either the left or right side. And what about sleeping on our back or belly? These choices might lead to even more or less temporary comfort, restlessness, or mouth-breathing.

How do we position myself? We curse the God of Night for messing with our sleep position. We flip back and forth. If we are sleeping with someone, then they are not likely to appreciate our shifting –and we might be annoyed with them for their own movement from side to side. I would suggest that it is time for us to take on a role that I have often suggested in this series of essays on high quality sleep. We need to become our own *Sleep Scientists*.

We need to make note of what happens when we lie in a specific position. This not only enables us to plan more carefully and effectively for our night of sleep but also to feel less helpless (and hopeless) about our sleep. As I have already noted, hopefulness is sleep-inducing.

Appliances

The challenge of sleep apnea is great for some people. I devoted most of a previous essay to an understanding and appreciation for the important role that breath plays in our life as sleepers. This often requires that we change the environment in which we are trying to sleep by making use of a C-PAP machine that filters the air that we breath and moves us away from mouth breathing. However, this option is very expensive, leads to inconvenience in preparing for sleep and to many hassles during the night. In short, as we found in our survey, C-PAP machines are not for everyone.

There is an alternative that is less expensive and less inconvenient. Instead of changing our environment, we change something more limited. We change the angle of our mouth and throat. This is done by having our dentist install an appliance that operates like the braces that many of us wore during our adolescent years. The appliance consists of partial molds of our upper and lower teeth that are connected by two bars that can be adjusted to push our lower jaw forward to different degrees. It

typically moves our lower jaw forward, thereby opening up our throat and allowing air to move more freely in and out of our nose. This appliance is placed in our mouth when we are going to bed.

A less expensive option is to purchase one of several simple mouth guard devices at the drug store that purport to open up airways in the throat by straightening the teeth and jaws. They are of limited benefit, but can be a viable option for some people with minor apnea problems. At the other extreme is the option of actually realigning one's teeth by installing an "adult" teeth aligner. We are back to adolescence – though these aligners are pretty much invisible. Unless we have other reasons to align our teeth, this 24-hour (or at least 18 hour) solution per day might not be worth the hassle and discomfort.

Sleep Position

The way we position ourselves among our pillows and blankets during the night might influence our capacity to breathe as much as does an appliance (or CPAP). Often sleeping on our side (especially when cuddling up with a long side pillow) reduces sleep apnea and breathing through the mouth when compared to sleeping on our back. Belly sleeping is also something a wonderful anecdote when confronting "breathless" sleep.

Then there is the matter of sheer comfort. For some sleeper there is nothing as wonderful in the world than lying on their favorite side and snuggling up with a cluster of pillows or a big soft side pillow (or a welcoming sleep partner). There is a "sweet spot" where hands, arms and legs are all in the right place, blankets and sheets are properly tucked in, and the room temperature is just right. Sleep soon takes charge.

Conclusions

I have laid out an eight-lane highway for achieving high quality sleep. With multiple bed-related pathways in place, we can readily fall asleep. We can look forward to this comfortable snuggling even if we wake up and get out of bed several times during the night (which as I have often noted is not necessarily a bad thing).

Whatever we have done health-wise to promote sleep and however we have prepared for sleep prior to heading into the bedroom, it is the bedroom setting that has the greatest immediate impact. Furthermore, the most immediate and intimate impact comes from the bed and its accessories, as well as the way we position ourselves in this bed for a night of breath-filled and well-positioned sleep. A high quality of sleep is likely to follow when we embrace these bed-related pathways—some of which are expensive but others of which are remarkably inexpensive or free.