



Posted on Sun, Jan. 17, 2010

Sleep easy on updated mattresses

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Akron Beacon Journal

If you haven't shopped for a mattress in a while, you're in for an awakening.

Bed and mattress makers have come up with all kinds of innovations that promise more comfort and better sleep - or at least some fun bells and whistles.

The new products are evidence that the bedding industry hasn't taken the recession lying down. Manufacturers hope consumers are getting the message about the health benefits of proper sleep, so as the economy strengthens and purse strings loosen, they'll be poised to buy, said Dale Read, president of the Specialty Sleep Association.

Here's some of what those manufacturers have to offer.

TEMPERATURE REGULATION

Research shows temperature is an important factor in how well we sleep. A number of mattress makers are developing products designed to keep sleepers cooler.

Italian manufacturer Magniflex, for example, makes mattresses from Eco Green memory foam, a plant-based foam that reacts to body weight. That's different from most viscoelastic memory foam, which is activated by body heat and therefore feels too warm to some people.

The Eco Green foam's open-cell structure makes it breathable, keeping the sleeper cooler, explained Andrea Mugnai, general manager of Magniflex's U.S. operations.

Israel-based Hollandia International is relying on fabric in its bid to help its customers keep their cool. It recently introduced a mattress covered in a three-dimensional fabric made in an open-weave design to improve air flow. The fabric is also easy to clean and dries almost instantly because the polyester fiber can't hold water or other substances, said Maya Ben, vice president of operations for Hollandia U.S.

Hollandia also makes mattresses with Coolmax fabric, which wicks moisture from the body, and Outlast, a fabric that stores excess heat from a body and releases it when it's needed.

Another innovation is a temperature-controlled mattress being developed by Chili Technology, a North Carolina company that makes a mattress cover called the ChiliPad. The temperature is regulated by water flowing through silicone tubes embedded about 1 1/2 inches below the surface, explained Todd Youngblood, the company's president and co-founder.

Semiconductor chips heat or cool the water to a selected point within the range of 46 to 118 degrees Fahrenheit, Youngblood said. No wires or other electrical elements are embedded in the mattress.

The mattress will be sold on the company's Web site. A queen-size mattress will sell for \$1,999.

GEL BEDS

Gel is one of the hottest trends in mattresses, said Read of the Specialty Sleep Association, a trade organization that specializes in newer-technology bedding.

The gel is used as a cushioning material over the bed's support structure, which could be foam or traditional springs. The gel is rubbery - think firm Jell-O - and forms the walls of a honeycomb-like structure that cushions and supports the body.

Manufacturers tout its ability to cradle pressure points such as shoulders and hips while maintaining the spine's alignment.

Canadian manufacturer Natura, which recently acquired gel-bed maker NexGel, sparked interest among buyers when it showed some of its gel beds at the recent Las Vegas Market, Natura's communications director, Julia Rosien, said.

The gel used in its beds is made from food-grade mineral oil, which is poured into molds and frozen to firm it, Rosien said.

The molded gel forms a layer over a core of either latex or memory foam. When a person lies on the bed, the vertical walls of the gel structure buckle under the person's weight - more under the heavier parts of the body and less under the lighter parts.

"It's really like lying on a cloud," Rosien said.

SLEEPING GREEN

Consumers are increasingly interested in the environment, and bedding manufacturers are listening. Most offer some sort of green option, said Karin Mahoney, director of communications for the International Sleep Products Association.

For some manufacturers, that might mean a renewed focus on natural latex. For others, it might mean incorporating natural, renewable fibers such as soy and bamboo.

Many of the manufacturers are what Mahoney called "light green," not deeply engaged in making ecologically sensitive products.

Not so Organic Mattresses Inc.

The Northern California company is the largest manufacturer of organic mattresses in the United States. "Organic" is an important distinction, its president and chief executive officer, Walt Bader, points out. Organic products are regulated; products marketed as "green," "natural" or similar terms are not.

The company's OrganicPedic mattresses are made from 100 percent natural latex cores surrounded by wool and covered with cotton. The wool is naturally fire-retardant, so no chemicals are needed to meet fire-resistance standards, Bader said.

Prices for its products range from \$1,595 to \$4,995.

ADD-ONS

Sometimes it's not the structure or major features of a mattress that get attention. Sometimes it's the extras.

Take, for example, Magniflex's aromatherapy mattress. Tiny capsules of lavender essential oil, a natural sedative, are embedded in the fibers of the mattress cover. Every time the bed is used, friction from the body breaks some of the capsules.

"Even if you don't smell the fragrance, it's still working through osmosis, through aromatherapy," Mugnai said.

The cover is removable and washable, and the lavender inside will last five to seven years, he said.

Another Magniflex mattress is covered on one side with cashmere and the other side with silk. Bits of silver are embedded within the cover, Mugnai said, to dissipate static electricity and kill bacteria.

Then there's Restonic's Healthrest Magnetic mattress, which contains Bioflex medical magnets. They improve circulation and alleviate pain, the New York company's literature says.

THE WOW FACTOR

Enough about mattresses. What about beds?

Some of those have gotten innovative, too - perhaps none more so than Hollandia's.

The company grabbed attention with its Sphere bed, the slightly wacky invention of contemporary designer Karim Rashid. The fabric-covered, boxlike bed frame features a built-in TV that can be flipped to reveal a mirror on the other side, a built-in wine cooler and lots of tiny lights for sparkle.

Another Hollandia creation is the Elite, with a 32-inch flat-screen TV, surround sound, an iPod dock and massage programs. The massager shuts off after a half-hour, just in case the experience lulls you to sleep.

"It's a completely different experience than just going to bed," Hollandia's Ben said.

No kidding.

TO LEARN MORE

- Magniflex, <http://magniflex.us> or (646) 330-5483
- Hollandia International, <http://hollandiainternational.com>, (888) 432-2337
- ChiliTechnology, <http://chilitechnology.com> or (704) 235-6831
- Natura, <http://naturaworld.com> or (800) 215-3002
- Organic Mattresses Inc., <http://organicpedicbyomi.com> or (800) 951-9196
- Restonic, <http://restonic.com>

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