



HOUSING

Buying furniture¹

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Quick Facts...

Always buy furniture from a reputable dealer.

Furniture is available from a wide variety of store types, but many services offered by full service stores may not be offered by discount stores.

Upholstered furniture should be well tailored, have matched fabric patterns, be well-built, and contain labels and warranties concerning care, usage and content information.

Wearing quality and surface appearance of fabric is influenced by the fiber, weave and finish of the materials used.

Most wood furniture has no written guarantee; inspect it carefully and critically before purchase.

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Determine Needs

Before deciding what furniture to purchase, decide what qualities the furniture will need to have to meet individual needs.

- Do you have a rough and tumble family?
- Will your furniture be used by children, adults or both?
- Will it receive heavy or light use?
- Will your pets be on the furniture?
- How much money do you want to spend?
- Do you want the furniture to last for a long time or do you plan to replace it in a few years?
- Is your room large or small?
- Does the room receive a lot of sunlight?
- Will the furniture be fairly easy to move?

Answer these questions whether you want to buy a sofa or chest, a table or chair. Your lifestyle and your budget can match what you buy if you shop carefully and ask questions.

It is a good idea to make a scale drawing of your room to take along with you while you shop.

Where To Buy

A consumer in the market for furniture should always buy from a reputable dealer. This is familiar advice, but how do you recognize a reputable dealer?

- Ask your friends.
- Ask the Better Business Bureau and local consumer organizations.
- Ask the dealer what services are offered.

You can choose from a wide variety of store types --from department stores to discount houses to specialty stores. Each has advantages. Depending on the dealer, the following services may be extra or included in the price: extending credit; warranties; service guarantees; delivery; warehousing; installation; returns; refunds or exchanges; polishing or touching up furniture after delivery; interior design services.

Ask about these services before, not after, you buy. Decide which services are essential to you for your purchase, but remember, you cannot expect the same service from a discount store that you get from a full-service store.

Upholstery Qualities

There are several items to look for in relation to the quality of upholstery.

- Good tailoring—straight seams—no puckering.
- Buttons securely attached.

- No loose threads, top to bottom.
- Matched fabric patterns.
- The frame itself should not be felt from the outside.
- Legs attached securely to the frame with corner blocks for bracing.
- Law label for the content of cushions materials attached to the

cushions.

- Warranty on fabric and on metal mechanisms in recliners and sofa beds.
- Availability of care information.

Try it out! Sit down and get up several times. Is it high enough? Low enough? Deep enough? Too deep? Sit there for at least 10 minutes. (Don't feel silly; you'll sit for longer than that at home.) Is it too soft or too hard? Will it be scratchy, or sticky in the summertime?

Ask about the cushion construction. What is in them and will they keep their shape? Find out about the kind of springs and see if they squeak.

If you are considering a sofa bed, make sure you can open and close it easily. Don't forget to lie down on the mattress to test its comfort.

What About the Fabric?

Most textile mills do not guarantee upholstery to the furniture manufacturer, so consider your selection with care.

First, look back to your needs. How will this piece of furniture be used—as a trampoline by active kids or for afternoon tea by auntie and grandma?

The wearing quality and surface appearance of fabric is influenced by the fiber, weave and finish of the materials used. Long threads in materials such as satin brocade may snag or break. Nubby threaded fabrics also may snag. Cut-pile fabrics such as velour and velvet will change slightly in color when their naps are brushed in different directions. If you're considering vinyl, remember that body oils and moisture can sometimes have a hardening effect on this manufactured material.

At the store, check for:

- Closeness of weave. Generally, the closer the weave, the more durable the fabric.
- Possible pilling. Take a pencil eraser and rub briskly on the fabric sample. If bits of fabric come off, the fabric may shed fibers.
- Sturdy backing. Rub the sample fabric together. Is it well-bonded to the fabric? Does it flake off?
- Fiber content. Natural, manufactured and fabrics are available today; each has advantages. Discuss them with the retailer.

Always remember your needs. Consider how well the upholstery fabric will stand up under daily use in your home. In general, tightly woven fabrics wear better than loosely woven; lightweight fabrics such as cotton and linen wear better when quilted. A medium color or all-over pattern will show less dirt. You also might find out if the fabric has been treated with a protective finish that helps repel dirt.

What About Wood Furniture?

Look it over... most wood furniture has no written guarantee. Be sure to give it the critical eye before you make a purchase. Don't be shy; inspect it all over. Check for:

- Uniform finish. Does the finish look the same all over? Rub the surface, is it smooth?
- Careful gluing. Good glues are so strong they can outlast wood. In fine furniture, excess glue has been wiped off.
- Corner blocks. Triangular pieces of wood screwed and glued to support and reinforce the corners of the frame should be present.

- Joints that fit tightly.
- A leveling mechanism to adjust the furniture to the evenness of the floor.

- Drawers that fit snugly in the frame.
- Drawers that open and close effortlessly. Try closing the drawer by pushing it in from one corner.
- Drawers that are smooth on the inside.
- Drawer sides and backs that are at least one-half-inch thick.
- Casters on large pieces of furniture to aid in moving them around.
- Armchairs that fit under the rim of the dining table you have chosen.
- Extension leaves that fit properly and match in grain and finish.
- Hangtags that identify the composition or construction of exposed surfaces.

- Care information.

If you are considering a table with an extension mechanism, be sure that you can operate it by yourself.

What's it made of?

Furniture today may be made of hardwoods such as mahogany, walnut, maple, oak, cherry, teak and pecan; or softwoods such as pine, redwood and cedar. Veneered woods also may be used.

Solid wood construction. Furniture made with solid wood tops and front and end panels is made with only the highest grade lumber, mainly hardwoods. The wood must be free of knots and sap pockets. It then must be carefully glued together in 3- or 4-inch wide strips; otherwise, splitting and warping will occur.

Veneer. Veneered furniture is sturdy, durable and beautifully displays wood grains and patterns. The veneering process involves using thin layers of decorative woods bonded to the top and bottom of "ply" construction. Ply construction increases the strength of the panel and improves its resistance to swelling, warping and cracking. Veneering also makes it possible to match fine grain patterns and to use inlays to create designs not possible in solid wood. Because it resists warping, veneered construction is especially desirable on large, flat surfaces such as dining table tops.

Engraving and printing. Manufacturers also may print or engrave wood surfaces with a wood grain having the appearance of a veneer. These surfaces can be attractive and are generally less expensive than the real veneer.

Look for the label and ask the salesperson questions about the materials and finishes used in construction.

The Waiting Game

Consumers must often wait a seeming eternity for their order of furniture. Why? The upholstery manufacturer must often wait for fabric delivery from the textile mill. The wood furniture manufacturer may produce a suite only two or three times a year. It is extremely expensive for the manufacturer to retool machinery to produce different styles, so it is more economical for both consumer and manufacturer to wait until sufficient orders are received before construction begins.

¹This information, from the bulletin *Furniture Buyer's Guide*, by the Furniture Industry Consumer's Advisory Panel (FICAP) and the Southern Furniture Manufacturers Association, has been reviewed by Craig Birdsong, Colorado State University professor, design, merchandising, and consumer sciences.

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