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Pillows – Selection, Use and Care
Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
Home and Family Series

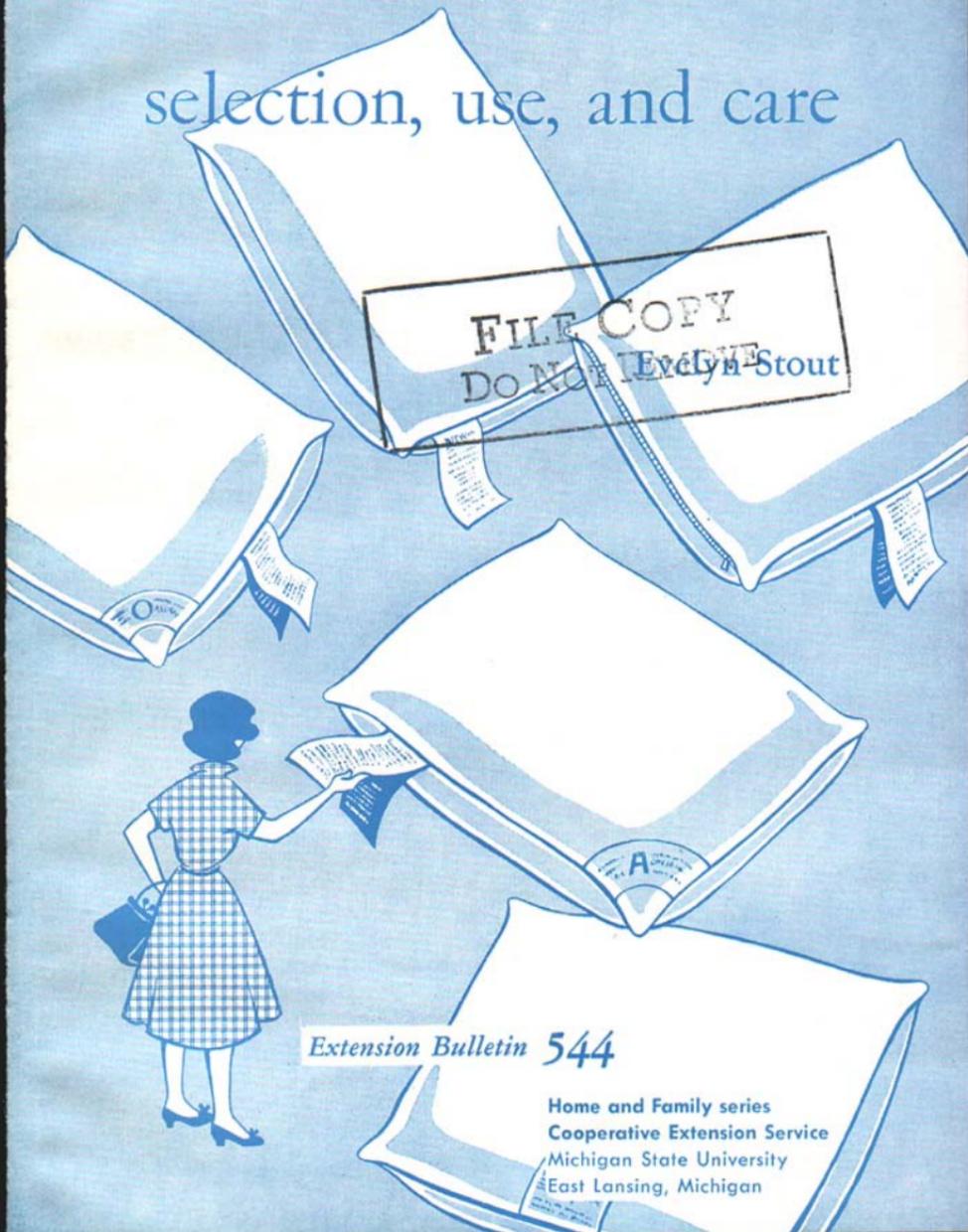
Evelyn Stout, Cornell Extension
October 1966
8 pages

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PILLOWS

selection, use, and care



Extension Bulletin 544

Home and Family series
Cooperative Extension Service
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

Are pillows a problem at your house? Are you carried away by the ads for new types of pillows? Do you need some new ones but are at a loss as to what kind to choose? Do your old pillows need renovating? Sleeping comfort is greatly affected by the type and condition of your pillows.

PART I. SELECTION AND USE

The pillow market has recently been complicated by the addition of many new materials. In addition to the down, feathers, and kapok pillows with which you have long been familiar, there are other old, but less familiar types, plus a few new ones such as foam rubber, Acrilan, Dacron, and Orlon.

Does the array bewilder you? Do you know what the differences are, and how to go about choosing the type of pillow *you* will like? It is quite possible that every person in your household will like a different kind of pillow.

Consider what you want your pillow to do for you. Should it be soft and yielding so that it will let your head and shoulders sink into it luxuriously? Then you may be interested in down, waterfowl feathers, Acrilan, Dacron, or Orlon. Or should it support your head and shoulders firmly without too much "give"? Then foam rubber may be the answer. Maybe you want firm support while you are working or reading in bed. Then you may want a very firm rubber, hair, or Spanish moss. There is a kind of pillow to meet nearly every need.

The Inside Story

We will consider fillers for pillows in three categories:

Down and feathers

1. Down
2. Goose feathers
3. Duck feathers
4. Turkey feathers
5. Chicken feathers



Rubber

1. Foam, or sponge

Other fillers

1. Hair
2. Spanish moss
3. Kapok
4. Acrilan
5. Dacron
6. Orlon

What do these terms signify?

Down is the softest type of filler for pillows, and is also the most expensive. White down and feathers are more expensive than gray, although the gray is just as good and wears just as well, in the same quality range. New York State law defines *down* as

"the soft undercoating of a waterfowl, consisting of the light fluffy filaments grown from one quill-point but without any quill-shaft."

Down often works through the ticking in feather and down pillows, and drifts about the room with the least breath of air.

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Waterfowl feathers make nicer pillows than land fowl feathers in the order listed. Note that pillow firmness increases as you go down the feather list, and price increases as you go up. Domestic down and feathers are often of better quality (and cleaner) than imported supplies, especially from the Orient.

Goose feathers have a strong curved (somewhat cupped) quill shaft—a natural arc—which gives them buoyancy, springiness, and durability. Goose feathers are broad and fan-shaped at the tip, and have a quantity of fluffy filaments at the shaft end—almost like down but growing from the quill shaft.

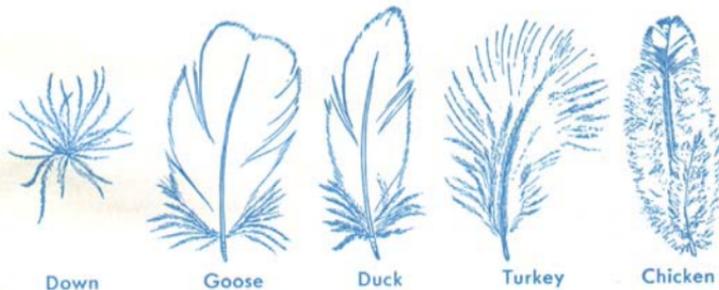
Duck feathers also have a curved quill shaft, but less curved and weaker than the shaft of goose feathers. They are, therefore, less buoyant and less durable. Duck feathers are narrower and more pointed, and have less soft, fluffy fibers growing from the base of the quill shaft than goose feathers.

Turkey feathers have a great quantity of long, fluffy fiber growing from the quill shaft and are quite soft, but the shaft is straight and weak. Turkey feathers are less buoyant, springy, and durable than goose or duck feathers.

Chicken feathers have straight, weak quill shafts like turkey feathers, with considerable short fluffy fiber growing along a great portion of the shaft. Chicken feathers have more sheen than other feathers, and have an extra tiny feather growing from the quill shaft. They are low in buoyancy when weight is applied.

In New York State "crushed" feathers are feathers which have been put through a curling process to put temporary curve in their shafts, or they may be mixtures of second-hand feathers. "Chopped" feathers are those which have been cut into small pieces. Feather fibers may be stripped from the quills and sold as "feather fiber" if all quills are removed, or as "stripped feathers" if not separated from the quills sufficiently well to be sold as feather fiber.

The possibilities in mixing the different kinds and types of feathers make it even more difficult for the consumer to judge the worth of a pillow. There are many mixtures of varying percentages of different types and kinds of feathers sold. A mixture of 80% goose feathers and 20% down has always been quite popular. Down mixed with feathers keeps feathers from matting and lumping and may be somewhat more durable than down alone.



Feather pillows, unless over-filled, are adaptable to changing positions of the user. They do not "fight back."

Rubber pillows in both natural and synthetic rubbers have been on the market for several years. "Foam" rubber and "sponge" rubber are said to be same products. Rubber pillows may be molded in one piece in the form in which intended for use, or may be molded in two or more pieces, the pieces then cemented together; or may be shredded from larger pieces and sold either shredded or cemented together. This product is called "cemented shredded rubber."

Latex rubber is natural rubber. *Neoprene* is synthetic rubber. Natural rubber is superior to synthetic for pillows, but both can vary greatly in quality and desirability. Rubber pillows may be purchased in varying degrees of softness or firmness. Rubber pillows resist distortion as you change position; your head does not sink into them. Some people say they "fight back."

Hair filling for pillows is usually curled horsehair. This makes a very firm and heavy pillow, primarily used for support when reading in bed, or for firm support for injured persons, the aged, or the ill. Hotels and hospitals sometimes have such pillows for these uses.

Spanish moss grows from trees in the South. It makes a firm pillow similar to hair, but lighter, cheaper, and less durable. Persons who are allergic to hair may find these pillows more satisfactory. They are not available everywhere.

Kapok is a floss from the seed pod of an East Indian tree often used for filling in pillows, sleeping bags, and for stuffing in toys for children who are allergic to animal fibers. Kapok is quite soft if the pillows are not filled too full. With use, it will eventually break down into dusty powder.

Acrilan, *Dacron*, and *Orlon* are synthetic fibers developed in the past few years. For use in pillows, fibers are cut into short lengths. They make a soft fluffy filling for pillows, not unlike down in feel. These pillows are still too new for data to be available as to how they perform in use. These are the same Acrilan, Dacron, and Orlon fibers you are getting in clothing fabrics, blankets, and curtains. All three fibers may be mixed in one pillow.

In most states, a manufacturer can not be prosecuted if the down and feather contents of his pillows is within ten per cent of the amount stated on the label. But the buyer can rarely see what the filler is like and sometimes manufacturers take advantage of the fact. Feathers of another kind, chopped or broken feathers, or percentages of other things high above the allowable percentages are adulterants used far too often. Hence, it is advisable to buy pillows made by a reliable manufacturer and sold by a reliable dealer.

In New York State muslin tags, which state what the filling material is, must be firmly attached to pillows. Most states have similar laws, but some states have no laws at all concerning products of this type.

The Cover Story

What about ticking or covering?

Feather and down pillows require a closely-woven 8-ounce ticking to keep feathers from working through. Twill and satin weave tickings are generally considered to be more satisfactory than plain weave ticking because they can be woven with more threads per inch, hence are usually tighter. Plain weave ticking is sometimes heavily sized with a filler which will gradually disappear as the pillow is used. Feathers may work through it even before the sizing disappears.

Other pillows may be satisfactorily encased in any type of ticking. Rubber pillows have either percale or satin covers. The latter are prettier but pillowcases tend to slip off satin-covered rubber pillows when in use.

How can you judge pillows?

Now that you have considered the possibilities in kinds of pillows, how can you judge which pillows are good ones? Here are some pointers:

1. Is it light in weight for its size? Of two pillows of the same size and plumpness with the same filling, the lighter pillow will usually be the better. Down pillows of a standard size weight about $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds per pillow, goose feathers $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds, and chicken feathers $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds.
2. Is it standard size (if that is what you are looking for)? Standard size is 21" x 27". A smaller pillow will "rattle around" in the pillow case, and larger ones will require large-size slips. Pillows both larger and smaller than standard size, are carried in many stores. You may need longer than standard size pillows if you have modern extra-wide beds. Many standard size rubber pillows are thinner than pillows of other types. You may wish to take along one of your pillowcases to try for fit unless you are willing to alter your slips.
3. Is it filled properly? A pillow should appear plump. Grasp the pillow at one end by both corners. Shake vigorously. The filling should not settle more than an inch or two. This test does not apply to molded or cemented rubber pillows. When balanced on the forearm a well-filled pillow holds up in shape while an improperly filled pillow will droop.
4. Is it buoyant—that is, will it support your head without its sinking too deeply into the pillow? Try this too!
5. Is it resilient—that is, does it rebound quickly? Lay the pillow on a flat



surface and press down on it with both hands. When pressure is released the pillow should immediately spring back into shape.

6. Is it free from odor? Sniff it to find out. Unpleasant odors may indicate improper cleaning or curing of feathers, and improper processing of other fillers. The odors will *not* improve with age. This applies to all types of pillows, including rubber.
7. Is it free from lumps, stiff feathers, and pieces of quill? Feel it carefully to find out.
8. Is it free from dust? Strike the pillow sharply. If dust flies, the filling material may be old and broken down, or it may not be clean.

Most of the above points apply equally well to all types of pillows. These further points should be considered when buying rubber pillows:

1. Is the pillow well-made? Examine the edges of the pillow itself to see if they are smooth and the whole pillow well-finished. You can also see the color and condition of the rubber. If the cover does not zip off, ask the salesperson to rip one end so you can see the rubber. Natural rubber pillows are available in white, gray, blue, or pink.
2. Does the cover come off? All rubber pillows have covers which, if the cover is sewn on, will have to be ripped and re-sewn each time washed.

How much should a pillow cost and how long should it last?

The cost of pillows varies with the filling and its purity, the size of the pillows, and the kind of ticking used. Chicken-feather pillows are the cheapest, and in a standard size may cost as little as \$1.98 per pillow. At the other extreme, finest quality white down pillows *may* cost as much as \$15.98 per pillow. Other kinds and qualities of pillows range between these extremes. As with other things, the prices of pillows vary with the economic conditions of the times and filler supplies on world markets. Stiff competition when fillers are plentiful sometimes leads to a price war in all types of pillows.

Many pillows are used far beyond their satisfactory life. A good goose feather pillow in regular use will last ten to fifteen years, and with occasional renovation may last even longer. Pillows handed down from one generation to another are quite likely to be past their prime.

PART II. CARE OF PILLOWS

In order to give satisfactory service, pillows should be used in the way intended for the specific type of pillow. Pillow fights are not recommended for any type!

Protection: Pillows should be protected from soil. An underslip over the ticking will help to protect both ticking and filler and will make the outer pillow slip

appear whiter. Where pillows are likely to be exposed to staining, or damp soil, plastic underslips are sometimes used, but many people find them noisy, hot, and uncomfortable.

Feather and down pillows should be fluffed and aired every day. This will help to keep the filling resilient, fluffy, and free from odors and will discourage moths. Kapok, Orlon, Acrilan, and Dacron pillows will probably benefit from sunning too, but airing when not in direct sunlight may be preferable for rubber. We haven't had these new types long enough to know what care is best for them.

Storage: Store pillows in a clean, dust-free place with ample space. If they are too greatly compressed, especially those filled with down and feathers, they may never regain their original buoyancy. Feather and down pillows should also be stored in a moth-free place and be well-sprayed or packed with moth preventive crystals. Crystals are preferable because the gas they form upon evaporation penetrates all the air space in and around each feather.

How may you clean and renovate pillows?

Feathers and other pillow fillings wear out and need to be replaced occasionally. An old pillow may be replaced with a new, or the damaged part of the filling or feathers may be removed from a pillow and new filling or feathers substituted. Renovation is done commercially more satisfactorily than at home, especially where the states have strict regulations concerning renovation and sterilization, as in New York. Not all laundries are equipped to renovate pillows although a majority will wash them. Proper renovation will include washing the filling and replacing that which is damaged, fluffing, sterilization, thorough washing of the ticking, or replacing with new ticking, if needed. The cost of renovating depends on how many of these operations are necessary considering the state of the individual pillows.

If you want to do your own cleaning and renovating

If ticking and feathers, down, Orlon, Acrilan, or Dacron fibers are not badly soiled, the pillow may be washed whole, as it is. Warm (not hot) soft or softened water, and thick mild suds should be used, following the general procedures for blanket washing. Wash no more than two pillows in a machine at a time. It will take fifteen or twenty minutes to get the filler clean. Rinse pillows thoroughly through at least three rinses at the same temperature as that at which washed. Pillows should not be put through a wringer.

Pillows may be dried in a tumbler drier with the temperature set at "moderate," they may be hung in a warm room with a fan turned directly on them to speed drying and cause movement of the feathers in the cover, or they may be dried on a line out of doors on a warm, sunny, and preferably rather windy day. Since it takes considerable time for a pillow to dry thoroughly it should

be fluffed occasionally and its hanging position changed from time to time. This will happen automatically in a dryer. Ask the dealer of your drier before drying rubber pillows.

If the pillow ticking is badly soiled, it is advisable to wash ticking and filling separately. To remove feathers from the ticking to another bag without scattering feathers or filling, follow these directions:

1. Prepare a muslin or other firmly-woven fabric bag of about the size of the pillow, leaving an open seam only 4 to 6 inches long at one end of the bag.
2. Shake the filling down in the pillow and open a seam at the empty end of the ticking of the same length as the seam left open in the end of the bag.
3. Pin the edges of the open seams of the ticking and bag together so that there is a closed passageway from one bag to the other. Stitch the pinned seam on the sewing machine with fairly long stitches.
4. Hang the sewed-together pillow and bag combination up by the free end of the pillow, preferably on a line out of doors. In a short while, or with an occasional gentle shaking, the filling will all have fallen into the lower bag.
5. Rip the stitches holding the two bags together and pin and stitch seam of the bag holding the feathers. The filling can then be washed in this bag.
6. Repeat the procedure to put the filling back into its clean or new ticking.

If the filling is to be renovated and some new filling material added, a single or double cheesecloth bag may be used in place of the muslin. As the filling dries and is fluffed and tossed by the wind or by hand the cheesecloth will permit dust and small bits of broken feathers to work out. Triple cheesecloth should be used for down filling. Have the needed amount of new filling material ready to add when the filling is put back into the ticking.

Rubber, Spanish moss, and hair pillows cannot be successfully renovated at home, except for cover replacement. Rubber pillows can be washed by removing from cover and washing pillow and cover separately. Place the pillow in a warm, mild suds and squeeze the suds through or over it. Rinse at the same temperature, again squeezing the water through. Squeeze between towels to get rid of as much moisture as possible. Place flat in a warm place to dry, or put in a bag or pillow case and hang on a line until dry, reversing position occasionally. Drying may take several days.

With proper use and care your pillows will give you long and satisfactory service at relatively low cost. But don't use them beyond their useful life!

Reprinted OCTOBER 1966