

# Buying Upholstered Furniture



The sign of **good quality and service** in the furniture industry

# At first glance...

There may not seem to be much difference between two suites ..... *but how do I know which to choose and what am I getting?*

This leaflet is a brief guide to help you choose upholstered furniture - which matches your needs.

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## More than meets the eye...

**W**hen buying upholstered furniture, the selection of products appears endless. There are many different styles, designs and price ranges. The temptation is to make the selection based on what looks good, feels comfortable (often after only sitting in it for a few minutes), fits in with the home colour scheme and meets budget. However, strength, durability and maintenance requirements should also be considered.

Lifestyles have changed and, as a result, upholstered furniture typically receives considerably more use than it did 30 or 40 years ago. Price is not necessarily an indication of durability.

**“Qualitas - promoting quality and customer care in the furniture industry”**

Buying from a Qualitas member gives consumers important safeguards including a commitment to producing a quality product, advice and help if needed in selecting an item and, if necessary, help in resolving any concerns customers may have.

**Buy with confidence from a Qualitas member**

## The Frame

The frame is the 'skeleton' of a suite, to which all the different suspension and upholstery components are attached. It should be well made, stable and strong enough not to break or give way in normal use.

Frames can be made from a variety of materials which can include wood, metal and plastic parts. But generally sofa frames are made from hardwood, or from a mixture of hardwood, softwoods in stress areas, chipboard, plywood or fibreboard. Many manufacturers combine hardwood and softwood.

However, this does not mean that a non-wood frame is a poor option - these materials can still be used to make a sofa frame that is sufficiently strong and stable, but with a difference in the overall price.

## Springs and Webbing

**A number of suspension systems are used for upholstered seating. The most common assemblies for sofas today are a series of serpentine or zigzag springs, or elasticated webbing either rubber or fabric. Other spring systems used include fishmouth sprung front edge units and coil springs.**

Serpentine or sinuous springs are fixed to the seat, back and arm sections of the frame, front to back, and securely fixed via various types of metal fixings or clips. Put simply, there should be at least five springs for each seat, dependent on the length. The frame fixing clips should be securely attached and someone sitting on the sofa or chair should not be able to feel any sharp edges through the

upholstery. The suspension system provides flexible support for the seat, back and arms and is normally covered, which helps to ensure the user does not easily feel the clips or springs.

Alternately, rubber or fabric elasticated webbing can be used which provide a flexible support system for the sofa or chair. There must be a sufficient number of webs to maintain the support system. The webbing system may be interlaced across the front to back webs to give additional support.

The suspension is the major support system and must be capable of withstanding the constant initial impact of someone sitting down during the life of the furniture. Some sprung seat platforms incorporate a flexible front edge for improved comfort and reduced cushion wear.

■ **Avoid anything that squeaks or creaks.**

## Cushions

There are three main types of cushion interior - foam, feather or polyester fibre.



Customarily, thin layers or sheets of foam are placed on the suspension system and covered by either the main decorative fabric or by a less expensive non-visible platform or lining cloth to reduce wear on reversible cushions. Thus a platform is formed for the seat, back and arm 'sitting' surfaces of the sofa, according to the design, onto which separate upholstered cushions are placed. These cushions may be fixed, loose or detachable via a series of zip fastenings.

### Foam

Foam is a popular filling for upholstery. It is resilient, flexible, easy to manipulate, and can be moulded or shaped to meet the most complex upholstery styles and designs. Upholstery seat cushions are predominantly filled with foam. They will soften in the first few months until they find their natural balance and this is quite normal.

Foam seat cushions are often wrapped in polyester fibre wadding to give an even softer feel for initial comfort and to reduce wear.

### Feather and Fibre

Modern upholstered furniture predominantly contain feather or fibre filled back and/or seat cushions. Both are popular for comfort because you sit 'in' them rather than 'on' them. But they do require a lot of plumping-up to retain their shape, although some people are allergic to feathers or the dust they generate. Feather and/or fibre cushion infills are often produced in sections to reduce the likelihood of the filling moving around inside the cushion, especially for the vertical 'back' cushion where downward movement could be a problem. They are liable to appear 'untidy' after use but the original look can usually be restored by smoothing out creases to avoid premature fabric wear and frequent plumping for shape retention.

There is no universal 'standard' for the plumping of seat and back cushions, and your retailer will be able to give you specific advice about care. Qualitas recommends regular plumping.



## Upholstery fabrics

Whilst all parts of upholstered furniture (frame, suspension, cushions and fabric) are important, the cover fabric usually attracts the most attention since it is the most visible element with the surface in constant contact with the user. The cover is subject to constant abrasion and flexing through body contact and will almost certainly wear out before the frame or fillings.

■ **Taking time to understand about fabrics will ensure that you choose the right product for you, and that it wears well for its intended use and location.**

## Textiles

**There can be a vast range of different cover materials to choose from. Durability is not necessarily proportional to price so it is important to choose carefully. The best guide to performance is whether fabric is suitable for 'occasional', 'light', 'general' or 'severe' domestic use. It is important you discuss your requirements, needs and expectations with the retailer.**

A large number of fabrics meet the 'general domestic use' standard. You need to weigh up the kind of use the sofa will get and purchase one with a fabric capable of meeting those conditions. Modern lifestyles make great demands on upholstery and the average family would be well advised to opt for a 'general' or 'severe' fabric grade.

Most fabrics in a display swatch are suitable for 'general domestic' use. Where this is not the case, fabric samples often have information on them about their suitability. If your retailer does not know the fabric's rating he can obtain this information for you from the manufacturer.

### Textiles are generally graded as follows:

#### Light domestic use

*Fabrics for light domestic use are generally fashion fabrics, these are suitable for light, careful living room use.*

#### General domestic use

*Fabrics for general domestic use are suitable for most styles of upholstery.*

#### Severe domestic use

*Fabrics classified as 'severe domestic' use are suitable for upholstery likely to be used throughout the day.*



## Leather

Leather is a natural product with its own unique characteristics - style, comfort and durability. It will have been subjected to many environments and may bear natural marks and blemishes. The natural scars show that it is the real thing and should not give cause for concern.

**There are different types of leather, classified as follows:**

### Aniline leather

This is a leather that has been dyed to colour, but has not received any coating or surface finish. This has the advantage of showing the natural leather off at its best including evidence of natural marks and blemishes.

This type of leather may need additional care and is likely to show all the signs of wear and tear. It will take on a 'lived in' appearance which is a natural characteristic and adds to the charm of the product.

### Semi-aniline leather

This leather has a small amount of surface coating which still allows the natural characteristics to be seen, whilst also protecting against soiling and aiding the use of cleaning products.

### By-cast leather (split leather)

This is produced from the lower split of leather by melting a type of glue on the surface, then rolling on a film of coloured polyurethane. This varies in quality and can lighten when stretched and scratch easily.

### Pigmented leather

This leather has a surface finish that gives a more soil resistant and durable finish that is easy to maintain. A pigment surface finish also allows leather to be produced in a range of fashionable colours (this should not be confused with By-cast leather).

### Nubuck and suede

These leathers are buffed on the wearing (grain) side to give a velvet-like nap. They are not surface-coated and so are easily soiled, and the velvet surface can become flattened in use.

### Antique appearance leather

This leather has surface lacquers applied which are designed to rub off in use and give an 'antique' or lived-in appearance. This is often pleasing and complements certain styles of upholstery very well. However, it should be borne in mind that the surface colour is designed to wear in this way; consequently the overall appearance of the furniture will change more than with other types of leather.

The introduction of softer, more supple leathers alongside new brighter, modern shades has increased the sales of leather furniture making them more popular than ever. A leather cover is normally expected to last longer than a typical modern textile upholstery covering. However as with anything, the lifetime of the leather cover will depend on the type of use and care it receives. ■ **Proper care and maintenance are essential in prolonging life.**

## Fire Safety

Domestic upholstered furniture must meet fire safety standards, which cover the fabrics, foam fillings and non-foam fillings.



When purchasing any upholstered furniture look for the display label - a swing ticket attached to the furniture, which should be easily visible. The permanent label may be located under a loose seat cushion or if the upholstery is fixed, secured to the base of the item or located at the junction between the seat and the back.

## Delivery

When buying upholstery, take a tape measure to check that you can get the furniture into the desired room and that it will fit the intended location.

When your furniture arrives, check carefully that it is 'as ordered' and fault-free. Damage and defects should be reported as soon as possible so that the matter can be resolved swiftly and satisfactorily.



# Caring for your upholstery



Proper care and maintenance will prolong the life of your furniture. Look for any available information - it is often hidden and may be a label under the seat cushion, in the seat/back junction, or on the base. Alternatively it may be provided separately as a small pamphlet. If you are unable to find any information, then ask.

**It is recommended that care and maintenance instructions for the furniture selected are obtained from the retailer and should be followed in preference to any other advice. However, here are a few simple instructions: -**

- Lightly vacuum upholstery once a week, less frequently for feather filled cushions. Dust removal may be improved by pre-brushing with a soft brush. Accumulated dirt will accelerate wear and dull colours.
- Regularly turn and interchange the positions of reversible cushions on constantly used upholstery. This will prevent excessive soiling and uneven wear.
- Zips at the back of cushion covers are there to aid the manufacturing process and do not necessarily mean that the cover is removable for cleaning purposes.
- Smooth out creases in the cushions to prevent them becoming permanent and causing early wear.
- Avoid exposing furniture to direct sunlight and/or heat whether direct or indirect for long periods of time as this may result in fading or degradation. Protect the furniture by drawing curtains and blinds whenever possible.
- Avoid repetitious wear on small areas of the fabric, such as arms and front edges of cushions.
- Avoid snagging the fabric: pet's claws, jewellery, buckles, zips/studs etc are all potential hazards.
- It is difficult to give general instructions on home cleaning since different fabrics require specialist techniques. Consequently, using a professional upholstery cleaner is recommended. The effectiveness of the specialist cleaning will depend upon the degree of soiling so it is advisable to have this done before dirt becomes too deeply embedded in the fabric. We would recommend at least every 12 to 18 months.
- Leather should only be cleaned in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. The use of cleaning solutions or preparations on products for which they were not intended could damage the surface of the leather.
- The best advice where care instructions for the leather are not available is to wipe the leather with a damp lint free cloth, using a mild soap solution when necessary as a last resort. The affected area should be rubbed gently until the soil is removed, never use detergent and care is needed not to soak the leather. Alternatively, contact the manufacturer for assistance.
- Trim loose threads, do not pull them.
- Don't put pressure on unsupported panels of upholstery (e.g. outside arms and backs) and don't sit on the arms.
- If accidental spillage or damage occurs, take professional advice to ensure it is dealt with properly.
- Do not wash or dry clean the fabric of your furniture unless the manufacturer's instructions specifically state that this can be done. Do not clean/wash only part of the upholstery where the product is designed to be maintained in this way, owing to possible colour change.
- Ensure your furniture is professionally cleaned regularly.



# Tips

## when choosing upholstered furniture

- ❑ Check the overall shape, look at the fabric and if pattern matching is important to you, confirm this is possible if not obvious on the display model.
- ❑ Feel the padding on the arms and back, and below the front rail. If you can feel the frame readily, with little pressure this may cause premature wear of the upholstery fabric.
- ❑ Upholstered furniture should be tried for a reasonable time, how you would normally sit, to assess whether it suits you. Remember foam softens naturally after the first few months of use until it finds its own balance.
- ❑ Ask how long the product has been on display etc.
- ❑ Move around on it and avoid any that creak or squeak.
- ❑ Sit on the furniture with your partner or a friend and check that the cushions do not push you towards the centre or tip you forwards. The cushions should fit snugly and there should be no gaps between adjacent cushions or arms.
- ❑ The back should provide firm support to the lower part of your back. Check you do not have to lean back too much. You should be able to sit with your back firmly supported with your feet on the floor.
- ❑ Remember cushions filled with feather or fibre will compress and crease and will need regular plumping-up to retain their shape.
- ❑ Consider how much you will use the item and ask about the fabric - is it suitable for general or severe domestic use?
- ❑ If the furniture has a recliner action, check that the mechanism does not rub against the cover fabric as this could lead to premature cover wear.
- ❑ Look for information labels or pamphlets providing care and maintenance instructions and/or details on the furniture's suitability for domestic use. Ask if you cannot find any. Upholstered furniture comes in many shapes and sizes - ensure you can fit it through your front door and that it will fit your room.
- ❑ When the selected furniture arrives at your home check that it is what you ordered and is fault free. Any problems or damage should be reported immediately so that they can be dealt with promptly and satisfactorily.

**If in doubt, consult your Qualitas retailer.**

# Qualitas Charter

## Manufacturers and retailers who are members of Qualitas will:

- ✓ Provide well-made and dependable products.
- ✓ Provide clear and accurate information about the product and its price.
- ✓ Provide clear and accurate information on suitability for use and product care.
- ✓ Provide accurate delivery information and give prompt advice to the consumer if there is any delay to a quoted delivery date.
- ✓ Where guarantees are given they must be clear and easily understood and comply with all current consumer legislation.
- ✓ Ensure that all service requests are handled with courtesy, efficiency and speed.
- ✓ In the event of an unresolved dispute to accept the ruling of the Qualitas conciliation service.



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