

12. Foam

There is high density, low density, high compression, low compression, 5,10 or 15 year, open cell, closed cell, latex, visco-elastic, memory, craft, outdoor and camping foam. And all you wanted was some new foam for the chair pads in the kitchen.



Cutting foam at home is easy if you use a bread knife or an electric knife. The electric knife works really well, find them in the big-box retailer's kitchen section.

How to know what you are buying

Testing foam by squishing it between your fingers will tell how hard you have to press your fingers to squish the foam. And not much else.

If you want to know more about the foam you are buying, ask the seller. If they can't tell you the density, compression, or year rating of the product, assume that you are buying a low quality foam.

Most foam dealers who know their stuff will be able to tell you the compression and density figures for the foam they sell. This is often expressed as a four-digit number such as 2227. The code breaker: the first two digits refer to the density and is expressed in pounds per cubic foot without the decimal and the last two

digits are the pounds of pressure needed to compress the 1-foot-cube of foam by one-third. For example: 2227 foam weights 2.2 pounds per cubic foot and it takes 27 pounds of pressure to compress the 1-foot-cube by one-third.

How to know what to buy

A good sofa seat foam is between two and three pounds per cubic foot.

A sofa seat cushion is usually rated at between 30 and 35 for compression, back cushions tend to be a bit softer, so less compression, 20-25, for example.

What to do if you want a good feeling seat cushion that is not rock-hard? Think of this as sitting in the foam, rather than on the foam. (This is also a criteria for choosing a foam mattress.) You need high-density low compression foam. Such as perhaps 5314 (5.3 pounds of weight, 14 pounds of compression—this would be found in high-quality memory foam).

Cushion wrap

Most foam cushions on a sofa or in a decorative pillow will have been wrapped with a quilt-batt-like substance, usually Dacron® or terylyne, that softens the look of the foam and rounds the edges a bit. If you are making your own cushions buy the wrap from an upholsterer; their product is bonded, which means it will not separate from the friction of the foam against the inside of the cushion cover. Regular quilt batting won't stand up well and tends to shred quickly.

Price of foam

Some retailers sell foam by the foot or meter per pre-cut width, but they base their prices on board foot. This is a piece 12 inches x 12 inches x 1 inch thick. If the piece was 2 inches thick, it would be 2 board feet. If you are comparing prices between retailers, break the price down to board feet to get a price you can accurately compare. See the chapter on Math for the Home Decorator for how to calculate board feet.

How to cut foam

Most foam sellers will cut the foam to the shape you need. Take a paper pattern of the shape. Remember too that in order to have a really snug cushion the foam is often cut about ½ inch larger than the finished size. This is up to you. Be careful with this though, if the foam is less than 3 inches thick or so, it may buckle if it is too tight in the cover.

The Foam Dictionary:

5, 10 or 15 year

The number of years of average use it will take to cause the foam to stay compressed when pressure is applied.

Camping

Inexpensive foam, usually black in color, wears out quickly, expect one season only.

Closed cell

The very firm foam that is used, for example, to construct a packing case that mirrors the shape of the object being packed.

Compression

The number of pounds of pressure it takes to compress that 12-inch cube of foam by one third. 40 compression foam takes 40 pounds to compress. This is referred to as the ILD (“Indentation Load Deflection” and it is actually a bit more complex than this simple definition but it’s close.).Typically a high density foam requires more compression to flatten it, but this is not a rule.

Craft

Inexpensive open cell polyurethane foam, usually white in color. This foam won’t last long as a chair pad or cushion filler.

Density

Density refers to the amount of material per cubic foot. High density foam has more material per cubic foot, low density has less. This figure is usually expressed in pounds per

cubic foot—how much a piece of foam 12 in. x 12 in. x 12 in. weighs. Or you may hear high, medium and low density. A number 1 density means the foam weighs 1 pound per cubic foot, 5 is really high density, it weighs 5 pounds per cubic foot.

Latex

Made from rubber, not petroleum products like most foam. Because of its resistance to mold and mildew this is the most hypo-allergic type of foam. It is also the most expensive. The highest density foam is typically latex foam, and it can weigh up to about 5 pounds per cubic foot.

Memory

A type of visco-elastic foam that conforms closely to the object being placed on it (like you). It is a product of the petroleum industry; the body-conforming properties are a result of the manufacturing process.

Open cell

The holes are not independent, they run into each other—take a close look at a sponge.

Outdoor

An open cell foam with big holes that are large enough for water to pass through. This is the best stuff for outdoor patio furniture or boat cushions. Please read the chapter on Outdoor Cushions, there is more information there on specialty foam designed specifically for outdoor use.