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“Massage Chair Buyer’s Guide”

Everything you need to know before you purchase a massage chair.

Choosing A Massage Chair

There is no definitive data which states which massage chair is necessarily better than the next at reducing back pain. In addition, there is no standard price level for massage chairs. Their prices tend to range from \$1,200 to \$3,500. Although a higher price usually correlates with a higher quality, this is not always the case with massage chairs. Recently, new lines of similar, if not better, models have emerged at significantly lower prices than past models. Customers can still typically expect to spend above \$1,700 for a quality introductory massage chair and around \$3,000 or less for the newer top of the line models.

Here are some general guidelines to follow when searching for a massage chair:

- **Strength of massage**—Make sure that the intensity of the massage is appropriate or adjustable. For a more vigorous massage, look for a chair that uses a quad (4) roller system with highly protruded components and strong movements that require 1 motor for each function. Those who desire a less intense, more point-specific massage may prefer a massage chair with 2 larger rollers and softer movements. Many quality chairs also have a pocket in the seat back pad of the chair that allows the customer to add or remove foam padding to help adjust the strength of the massage.
- **Presets and Adjustability**—Some massage chairs may have a preset that is specific to a problem area in the back. Other chairs may offer greater variability. A massage chair with a large range of adjustability may prove beneficial when purchasing a single chair for multiple users.
- **Accessories**—Certain massage chairs come with a leg rest that extends out of the chair or flips open to massage the soles of your feet. Some positions may be more comfortable for certain back conditions; for example, sitting in a reclining position with the legs elevated may be more comfortable for some people with spinal stenosis. Several chairs have a leg rest that has its own massage or vibration capabilities. Some models even have special zero gravity positions designed by NASA to help take the weight off the spine.
- **Appearance (Material)**—Chairs can be made with leather and polished wood, synthetic leather and plastic, or other combinations of fabrics and materials. Although the decision should not rely on appearance only, this may be a factor when purchasing. All of the top manufacturers of massage chairs use a special synthetic material that has an elastic quality. This special material allows the massage arms/rollers to pull and stretch the material repeatedly without wear or losing its shape. In addition, this synthetic material is used because some chairs are equipped with heating capabilities and leather cannot withstand the heating elements repetitive use, as it will dry and crack. Cheaper chair companies use leather as a gimmick to get a few hundred dollars extra for their chairs. **BUYER BEWARE:** most chairs that claim to be leather are only 30%-40% leather and 60%-70% synthetic. This mixing and matching of materials leads to uneven wear patterns on the chair as the leather dries, cracks, and fades over time.

- **Best Massage Chair (Brands)**—Many online companies import their own brand of massage chairs and self proclaim that they have the best massage chair. *Consumer Reports* has yet to do an unbiased review of massage chairs, so beware of what you read on different websites as most of the information is self proclaimed fame. One should look for a brand of chair that is made by a large company that will be around for many years to come. Make sure the company you buy from has been around for at least 5 years. If they can survive their first five years they are likely to be around for a long time.
- **Warranties**—Get a copy of the warranty before you purchase the chair or see if it is posted on the company’s website. Many companies will not furnish you a copy until you purchase the chair and you should be skeptical. Before writing this guide we contacted 10 companies and only received 3 copies of warranties. The brands that did give us warranties were (Elite, Premier, Panasonic, and Interactive Health). Top of the line chairs will come with 5 year standard warranties that cover parts and labor. Beware that some companies have 5 year warranties but they do not cover labor. Also beware of companies selling in-home warranty repair and service policies as this is never what it is cracked up to be. Most of the time if repair work needs to be done, you have to send the broken part of the chair back to the manufacturer. With in-home service, they typically schedule a 4 hour window on a week day for arrival, come to your house, and then tell you that you need to send it back to the manufacturer as they are not equipped to work on the chairs themselves. In-home service is really not in-home service, but again some companies use this as a gimmick to attract customers.
- **Country of Origin**—Obviously, every country is going to claim they make the best massage chair. Currently, there are massage chairs made in almost every Asian market, Mexico, and Brazil. When writing this Buyer’s Guide, we were unable to find any chairs manufactured in the United States. We did find that a few companies such as Elite Massage Chairs design many of the chairs in the United States and then assemble them overseas. This process makes their chairs fit the average American’s height and weight better than some other brands of chairs designed in Asia. Nearly all massage chairs are either manufactured, assembled or both, in Taiwan, Japan or China. No one country makes the best chairs. One thing to note is that equal quality chairs from Japan typically cost 15%-30% more than chairs from other countries. This extra cost is due to taxes and duties associated with shipping chairs from Japan to the United States. When buying a chair that is made in Japan, you will pay extra for the exact same quality and features offered in chairs made from China or Taiwan. We have generally found that chairs manufactured and assembled in China are often very inexpensive but do not last. Chairs manufactured and assembled in Japan are very expensive but also high quality and long lasting. And chairs manufactured and assembled in Taiwan are both long lasting and less expensive. Many manufactures now choose to manufacturer their parts in Japan or Taiwan and have them assembled in China. It assures a lower cost and still maintains a high quality.
- **Trends**—Some of the newest trends can be seen in the leg rest of massage chairs. All of the latest models have the calf troughs or calf cutouts to massage the calf area of your legs. Having a patent on the design, Interactive Health is the only

chair company whose calf massager flips around so that it cannot be seen when not in use. Many of the older chairs that have calf massagers use air bags in the footrest of the chair. Many of the latest chairs have stopped using air and now put more expensive and better feeling motors in the leg rest to massage the legs. Air massage mainly squeezes the leg whereas motors actually massage the legs. Air massage also adds noise to the massage chair as it has to drive an air compressor to inflate and deflate the air bags. Chairs with motors are typically quieter than chairs with air. Another trend is unsightly air bag arm massagers. These claw air massagers work just like a blood pressure cuff at the doctor's office. They squeeze and release and do not work for larger adults with big forearms. If you like having your blood pressure taken, then you may like the air arm massagers.

Massage Chairs For Pain Relief

A good massage can do wonders for relieving tension and back pain, but a therapeutic massage is not always convenient or available. While it is still best to get a massage from a licensed massage therapist, an electronic substitute is now available that may provide some of the benefits of the human touch—the massage chair.

Most people believe massage chairs are a luxury item and for many it may be the most expensive appliance in the home. Since price is a factor, people should do their research prior to purchasing a massage chair. The benefits that a massage chair can bring may outweigh the price.

Five considerations when purchasing a chair for pain relief:

- **Motors**—these are the essential mechanical aspects of the massage chair. They power and move the nodes and rollers to the necessary areas, as well as allow the needed adjustments to the seat back. The massage chair has numerous preset patterns and programs used to massage the entire back. However, the motors, nodes, and rollers are meant to be modified through the control pad that accompanies all massage chairs. As the user specifies, the massage chair focuses on the neck down to the lower back with a tapping, rolling, or kneading motion. Advanced chairs like the Panasonic EP30000 series can combine all the motions into one, that is, the chair can roll, knead and tap simultaneously.
- **Nodes and Rollers**—these vary in size and shape, designed to emulate fingers and hands. A massage chair with dual (2) large rollers and nodes provides a more generalized approach at massaging such as in many Panasonic and Interactive Health “Human Touch” models found in malls, while massage chairs with smaller quad (4) nodes and rollers provide more detailed, point-specific deep tissue shiatsu massaging. They target specified areas of the user's back and can move in a variety of ways which are pre-programmed into the mechanics of the massage chair. The user can adjust these nodes and rollers to best fit his or her needs.
- **Stroke Length**—this is the distance the massage rollers and nodes travel up and down the spine. Chairs can have a stroke length of 19” to 30” and this should be

an important factor to consider when purchasing a chair. The Interactive Health models that can be seen at most mall locations have a 19” stroke length that covers the middle of the back. The Elite, Panasonic and Inada massage chairs have the longest stroke lengths at 30”. The longer the stroke length, the more of the back the chair is going to massage. This is extremely important for individuals taller than 5’8” and should defiantly dictate a massage chair with a longer rolling stoke. Anyone over 6’ tall will want a chair with a massage stoke of 30” A shorter individual may still benefit from a longer stroke length because much of the distance that is gained in the longer stroke is in the lower back area. If the massage rollers travel too high on the neck or head, the pillow flap on most chairs can be adjusted to the base of the skull so that you cannot feel the rollers. In general, a massage chair should travel from the base of the spine up to the ears. For the average American adult, a 27” or greater stroke length will suffice.

Benefits Of A Massage

A good hands-on massage can play a crucial role in alleviating back pain. Similarly, a good massage chair is designed to provide some measure of pain relief and relaxation without the need for person-to-person interaction. In-home privacy, convenience and time efficiency, are the major reasons why many people are choosing with a massage chair as a potential means to ease back pain.

Comprehensive research has demonstrated three central reasons why massage is beneficial:

- **Improves venous and lymphatic flow**—manipulating muscles increases blood flow. Increasing blood flow facilitates the circulation and absorption of nutritional elements into the muscles and tissues. Increasing lymphatic circulation clears toxins out of these areas. Together, this revitalizes the massaged area.
- **Decreases tension and improves flexibility**—massaging helps loosen tight and strained muscles. Stretching and kneading problem areas allow muscles to relax as well.
- **Increases endorphin levels**—possibly the most beneficial aspect of massage. Endorphins are the 'feel good' chemicals that run through the body—increasing their levels induces positive results. Among other benefits, increasing endorphin levels has been correlated with quicker recovery, reduced pain, and reduced anxiety.

These benefits of massage work both physically and psychologically to help reduce common symptoms of back pain. Through the study of the human body and analysis of feedback, many massage chair designs have been developed with the goal of achieving similar benefits.

Currently, the most effective massage techniques that massage chairs are designed to simulate are that of Shiatsu massage.

- **Shiatsu** tends to use pressing, sweeping, tapping, rolling and rotating movements. The defining characteristic of Shiatsu is its focus on releasing tension in specific locations of the body.

Of course, a mechanical substitute can never reproduce the exact feeling of human touch, but the chairs are starting to come close. As years have gone by, designers have more closely approximated the necessary factors in a massage chair to provide its user with some measure of relief from back pain and neck pain.