

Sofas are for cocktails; couches are for potatoes

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Sofa, couch, chesterfield, divan. Whatever you call it, choosing the main piece of seating in your home is an important decision.

Because of its size, the appearance of your sofa will make a big impact on the look and feel of your living room, family room or den. Besides walls, ceilings and floors, it is usually the biggest surface in your living room and you want it to be the right style and covered in the right material.

There are some things to consider when choosing a sofa, chair or love-seat. A hardwood, kiln-dried frame is the first consideration. This means the frame won't split or warp. The supports beneath the seat cushions should be a quality coil system with steel coil springs, and eight-way hand-tied, which has become an industry standard.

Cushions ideally should be high-density foam with a Dacron or down-blend wrap for softness.

Sofas come in sizes ranging from 70-plus inches for a small sofa, also known as an apartment sofa,

80-plus inches for a medium sofa, and 90-plus inches for a large sofa. Cushions come in many configurations such as one, two or three seat cushions. Back styles come in tight back, meaning no cushions, or two or three back cushions. My professional preferences lean toward three seat cushions, mainly because the look is so polished, but also because guests are loathe to sit on the center "crack" between two cushion seats.

Choosing a skirted or unskirted sofa depends on the size of the room as well as the floor plan. I love the look of a skirted sofa, but in small spaces an unskirted sofa is a much better choice, because a sofa without a skirt takes up less space visually. It is a huge difference.

Fabric covering is really important when choosing a sofa to meet your needs. The first thing to consider when choosing fabric is lifestyle. Do you entertain? Do you have children or grandchildren who frequently come to visit? What style is the rest of your furniture? What kind of natural light do you get? Where will the sofa be in relation to the windows?

If you know your sofa will be getting a lot of use, then it's wise to

choose a forgiving pattern and fiber content. For people with kids and pets, I recommend a patterned fabric with texture, not floral chintz mind you but a strong woven fabric with multiple colors. They are hard to choose because most people don't have the confidence it takes to work with patterns, but bringing home large swatches and looking at them side by side will help. Another option is a cotton blend slipcover. Slipcovers require reshaping and flipping weekly but if you don't mind doing this, a slipcover is a good option. Upholstery fabrics should be used for upholstery. Upholstering a sofa in lightweight cotton won't retain its appearance or condition.

When purchasing a sofa from a designer or store, you will be offered two fabric options.

"Program" fabrics are the fabrics that the sofa manufacturer provides. You can choose from a variety of grades, usually labeled from A to Z depending on the number of choices — A being the cheapest and Z being the most expensive. Choose from the higher grades. The cheap grades look it and wear out quickly.

Another option available through

designers is called "customer's own material" or COM. I prefer this because it gives me much more control of the design scheme. It adds to the cost though, making it extremely important to work with the client and their budget.

Shiree's Cheat Sheet

- Don't go for the tight back sofas with all the pillows. They might look pretty, but they are highly impractical with questionable comfort. Instead, do three 20-inch down-blend pillows, which gives you the "look" of a pillow back without the inconvenience.

- A good quality sofa will run \$3,500. There are some very good ones coming out of Los Angeles and North Carolina, the furniture capital of the country.

- Playing it too safe with neutrals will usually look forgettable, but one easy way to add some style and confidence is to choose a sofa upholstered in a heavy-weight tone-on-tone variable-stripe cotton and linen blend. Add three 20-inch down-blend pillows in a bright floral or velvet in a saturated color with a tiny welt or brushed fringe.