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Pillow Talk: Buckwheat for Sleep

By [LAURA JOHANNES](#)

Buckwheat husks are crunchy and hard—not the first thing that comes to mind as ideal pillow stuffing. But makers of buckwheat-filled pillows say the hulls resist dust mites and help reduce aches and pains by conforming perfectly to your body contours. Clinicians say the pillows seem to aid in keeping the spine aligned, but two published scientific studies suggest the dust-mite claims should be taken with a grain of salt.

Traditionally used in Japan and other Asian countries, pillows filled with buckwheat husks are being heavily marketed in the U.S. The pillows, which typically cost \$15 to \$75, are available in stores, on the Web and in the offices of some chiropractors, physical therapists and medical doctors. For crafty types, sew-it-yourself instructions are posted on Martha Stewart's Web site.

One of the major manufacturers, Tru-Makura Co., Orange, Calif., uses buckwheat hulls grown in the Dakotas. The company, which makes the Makura Miracle Pillow, cleans the hulls to remove flour residue, which could trigger some allergies. Since the buckwheat hulls don't compress, Tru-Makura says on its Web site, the pillow "conforms to the exact contours of the head and neck" and is recommended by health-care professionals for relief of neck pain, headaches, muscle, tension, snoring, sleeplessness and other conditions.

Scientific evidence that buckwheat help these conditions is scant. But the pillows do have a significant fan base among clinicians. Sussanna Czeranko, a naturopathic physician at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Ore. recommends buckwheat pillows to patients who have trouble sleeping. "If you support your cervical spine and neck, you are going to sleep better," she adds.

Earlier this year, the International Chiropractors Association of California endorsed the Makura Miracle Pillow. "You put a little dent in it and it supports your neck when you lie on your back," says Berkeley chiropractor Mik Hamilton, a member of the association's board of directors. Side sleepers can bunch up the buckwheat husks under the neck for support, he adds. The Sacramento nonprofit trade group receives a donation of 7% of the purchase price from the seller every time one of its members buys a pillow.

Most complaints of neck pain are caused by tense, irritated muscles, says Scott J. Lepre, a clinical associate in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. Poor posture during the day, or bad ergonomics at work, are often mostly to blame. But a buckwheat pillow, used properly to keep the neck in a neutral position, can "reduce the stress" for the time you're sleeping and give

muscles a chance to recover, says Dr. Lepre, who sleeps on a buckwheat pillow.s . Some types of headaches, caused by tight and irritated muscles in the back of the neck, can be helped, he adds.

Many pillows have a useful zipper, which can be used to adjust the number of hulls; after several years of use, the pillows flatten, and more hulls must be added. In a test for this column, the Makura Miracle Pillow initially felt rock hard, even after adjusting the number of hulls, and the rustling of the hulls while finding a comfortable sleeping position was annoying. But after a few days of use, the pillow did seem to provide additional support over the typical down-filled pillow and kept the spine comfortably aligned.

However, there is no evidence that buckwheat pillows resist dust mites, and at least two published studies contradict that claim. A 26-pillow study, published in 2004 in the Journal of Korean Medical Sciences, found the amount of dust-mite allergens on buckwheat pillows equal to the amount on synthetic pillows after three months of use. The study, which used Korean-made pillows, also found the buckwheat pillows had higher levels of a bacterial toxin that can aggravate asthma.

Study co-author Rob Siebers, a scientist at the University of Otago in Wellington, New Zealand, says the toxin finding may not apply to U.S. pillows, where hulls are typically cleaned more thoroughly. As far as he knows, he says, there are no published studies on dust-mite-allergen levels on U.S.-made buckwheat pillows. Some manufacturers say feedback from their customers suggest allergy sufferers are getting relief. Birgit Roessler, owner of the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Pillow Co., which says on its Web site that its pillows "do not house dust mites," says the company gets good feedback from customers who are allergic to dust mites.

If you do think there are mites in your buckwheat pillow, you can kill them by freezing them. Manufacturers say you can't wash the hulls since they don't dry easily. And even if a pillow is thoroughly cleaned, some people may be allergic to the buckwheat itself. That's rare, but at least one case of a buckwheat allergy caused by a pillow has been reported in scientific literature.

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