

BUYING A MASSAGE TABLE

Buying the right massage table can be a daunting challenge, especially for a new massage therapist whose career path isn't settled. When looking at those beautiful wooden tables with the plush foam and fancy add-ons, your heart may say one thing while your wallet insists on something else. And your back and shoulders, which will likely end up hauling that table around from place to place, may have a different opinion altogether.

There's no one right answer, of course. What's right for one person may be all wrong for another, and consumers need to weigh a number of factors. If you're in the market for a massage table, following are some tips from table manufacturers to help you purchase wisely.

1. KNOW YOUR PERSONALITY

Are you the kind of person who always wants to have the best—or at least the best you can possibly afford—or are you, in general, happier spending just what you can to get by? Neither way is inherently better than the other, but what strikes one person as a wise commitment to quality may seem to another to be needless overspending, and one person's prudent thriftiness is another's shortsighted stinginess.

“Some people say that if you don't make a full-on commitment to this process, you're setting yourself up for failure, and if you believe you have to make that kind of commitment and then you buy a cheap table, it's self-sabotage,” says Marty Booth, a longtime massage table craftsman and owner of Massage Resources, of Lotus, California. “On the other hand, if you allow yourself to be bullied by a salesman into buying more than you need, you've been manipulated. One needs to be careful that the basic things you do in setting up your practice are in alignment with your belief systems.”

2. CONSIDER YOUR BODY TYPE

If you're tall and lanky, you can work on just about any size of table, as long as the table is adjusted to the proper height, and virtually all tables nowadays come with adjustable height. But if you're short—under 5'5"—and have correspondingly short arms, table width becomes critical.

“Make sure you can step in close enough to the client to direct your body weight through relaxed shoulders down through your hands,” advises Teri Sura, sales manager for Custom Craftworks in Eugene, Oregon. “Reach across the table and make sure it doesn't feel stressful. Someone who is 5'2” typically won't choose a 32-inch table. Individuals who are 5'5” or 5'6” will probably need a standard-width table, 29–30 inches. Once you're at 5'8”, you can look at a wider table. They go up to a maximum of 35–36 inches.”

One option available in high-end, stationary tables is a contoured top, which allows the therapist to step in closer at the client's mid-section and legs while still providing the comfort of a wider table elsewhere.

3. CONSIDER THE TYPE OF MASSAGE YOU'LL BE DOING

This can be difficult for a massage student to predict. “You may not know that until you get through school, and then you'll see ‘I'm good at craniosacral work’ or ‘I'm good at deep-tissue work.’ And each modality requires different features on the table. So to be buying a table while you're still a student is, in some respects, putting the cart before the horse,” says Bruce Eatchel, president of Stronglite (a division of Earthlite), based in Salt Lake City, Utah. That's why Eatchel suggests students wait a while before investing in a top-quality table.

For those who do know where their specialty lies, consider the stress that a given modality may put on a table. Obviously, a therapist who climbs onto a table with a client would be wise to invest in a stronger table, built to hold greater weights. And Eatchel warns that “static weight” is different from “working weight.”

“You could drive a car up on most of these tables, and it would hold for a while if you didn’t move it around,” Eatchel says. “That’s static weight.” The changing pressure that a therapist exerts onto a client means the working weight can be considerably greater.

Consider, too, the type of client you’ll be seeing. Those who plan to work with bariatric clients, for example, will need sturdier tables.

4. CONSIDER HOW MUCH YOU CAN CARRY REASONABLY

The majority of massage tables sold today are portable because most therapists must travel in their practice. Thus, table weight becomes an issue. Some tables weigh as little as 20.5 pounds, others go up to 50 pounds, but most are in the 32–38 pound range.

Unless you’re certain you’ll be doing only work in a studio, or else have substantial upper-body strength, manufacturers advise buying a table that weighs no more than 35 pounds.



There's no watchdog agency that oversees manufacturers' claims regarding how environmentally friendly their products are, but there are still questions you can ask to help guide you to an ecologically-sound purchase.



Pisces, a Sebastopol, California-based manufacturer, offers the lightest massage table made—20.5 pounds—at a cost of \$579. A similar model, weighing just one pound more, costs \$499. Is a single pound worth an extra \$80? Pisces sales manager Kim Griffin says it can be. “If your client has stairs, you’ll feel the difference. And if it saves you a trip to the chiropractor because you’ve thrown your back out, it’s definitely worth it.”

5. REMEMBER THAT THE TABLE ALONE ISN'T YOUR SOLE EXPENSE

One debate among massage therapists is whether to get a table with a face hole or a face cradle. It's even possible to get a table with both. “When you buy a face hole table, you're committing to buying sheets with holes in them, unless you're resourceful or can find someone who sews. Otherwise, you'll have to pay commercial prices for sheets with holes in them. But with a face cradle table, any sheet works just fine,” Booth says.

6. ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WARRANTY

The industry standard these days is a lifetime warranty on the frame. But what about the fabric and foam? Is it guaranteed for three years? Five? And what about shipping? Many manufacturers will pay shipping one-way, but expect the consumer to pay to ship the table in for repair, and that in itself can be pricey—especially if

you must pay to have it boxed and wrapped in protective foam. For that reason, you're advised to keep the box the table comes in. It makes shipping a lot easier if you do have to return it.

"Ask who the company is and how they back their product," suggests Jeff Riach, CEO and founder of Oakworks, of Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania. "The biggest thing is, how substantial is the company and what's their reputation for customer service." Remember: if a company goes out of business, its warranty is useless.

7. FOAM MATTERS A LOT, VINYL NOT SO MUCH.

Broken, stained, or cracked vinyl won't register with clients. It can always be covered with fleece and they'll never notice. What they will notice is how the table feels. Booth advises investing in as much foam as you can afford—keeping in mind that extra foam means extra weight.

One versatile accessory is a body cushion, a separate table topper that increases the comfort of tables, regardless of how much foam they have. Body Support Systems, an Ashland, Oregon-based company, offers a \$329 four-piece body cushion that company owner Tom Owens says optimizes a client's body position, regardless of the table underneath. "The number of people who have a negative experience because of uncomfortable positioning is huge," he says. "That should be a first consideration."

8. CONSIDER BUYING A USED TABLE

The downside of this strategy is that almost no manufacturer will transfer a warranty beyond the original owner. But the upside is there are bargains to be had.

"Personally, I feel our foam only hits its stride at eight to 10 years old," says Custom Craftworks' Sura. "If it's a good quality table, it will just be broken in for you, not worn out. Oils and lotions can get into the vinyl, and things happen over time if a table is not cared for properly. But you can expect to get 20 years of service out of a good table."

Sometimes good tables turn up at garage sales. But a surer route is to check the bulletin board at a massage school, and after that, try local classified ad listings.

The converse of this tip is, investing in a higher-end table now means greater resale value down the road. "The best tables hold their value much longer," says Jim Craft, owner of Custom Craft, a table manufacturer based in Longwood, Florida. He says his tables typically retain 80 percent of their purchase price for five to seven years, which could be an important consideration when you're ready to upgrade.

9. THINK GREEN

There's no watchdog agency that oversees manufacturers' claims regarding how environmentally friendly their products are, but there are still questions you can ask to help guide you to an ecologically-sound purchase. Is it made with sustainably harvested wood? Are the finishes and glues nontoxic? Does it use water-based lacquer? Do they use environmentally-friendly polyurethane vinyl? Do they recycle the wood chips in the manufacturing process? "You just have to call and ask questions," Sura suggests. "The manufacturers will tell you what they're doing, and they won't tell you they're doing something if they're not."

10. BE TAX SAVVY

Some high-end tables may qualify for a Section 44 Disabled Access Tax Credit, which can amount to a substantial tax write-off, in essence subsidizing 50 percent or more of the purchase price of the table. To qualify for the tax credit, the table must adjust to a height below 19 inches, thereby making it accessible to handicapped persons in wheelchairs. Obviously, this requires an electric lift, so portable tables won't meet this requirement, but it's definitely something to consider if you're looking to invest in a stationary table. "Consider this scenario," says Hart Griffiths-Zill, sales representative for Touch America, based in Hillsborough, North Carolina. "Say your purchase price is \$3,600 for an ADA-approved table. If you file your taxes correctly, you'll wind up paying only \$1,400 for that \$3,600 table. The IRS will subsidize your investment." **m&b**

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