

# **A Safe Bed to Sleep In**

*By J. Camphill*

Like the late singer/songwriter, Kim Palmer, sings, “It’s hard to get good rest.” People with MCS often have trouble finding tolerable bed and bedding, as it is usually at night that we are the most sensitive, and bedding is literally in our faces all night.

This article draws from the experiences of several people and what worked for them. Some of the situations are extreme. Fortunately, many of us do not have to go that far.

What works for some does not work for all. We are all different, so make sure to test a product before spending a lot of money.

## **Bedding**

In many cases, it is not too hard to set up a safe bed. If cotton is ok, it may work well to buy about seven all-cotton mattress pads to sleep on, instead of a mattress or futon. They can be washed in a washing machine and dried in a dryer or on a clothesline, so they are much easier to break in than a mattress or futon.

Mattress pads are available from Janice’s and the American Environmental Health Foundation (see list at end of article). A cheaper alternative is to only buy two mattress pads, and then put a bunch of large beach towels or bath towels in between. The mattress pads provide the stability that the towels can’t.

Other alternatives are heavy blankets, pieces of cotton rugs (especially reversible rugs) or synthetic camping mats.

A home-made futon can be made from cotton batting (at least 20 ft/7 m). The batting is first aired out or washed to tolerance (in a bath tub). Then fold it up in many layers and perhaps stitch it together.

If you need something softer, you can make your own mattress by buying the naked steel springs (i.e., without any stuffing, etc.) from a mattress manufacturer, and pile your bedding on top of it.

Organic cotton mattresses are available without flame retardants, with a note from a doctor. But many people with MCS do not do well with them anyway. These mattresses cannot be washed, and they take a long time to offgas, if ever. They are also very expensive and impossible to return if not tolerated.

Some people have had luck buying a thick mattress topper of wool from LifeKind. Another source is Vivetique. It is too thick to put in a washing machine, and even trying to wash it in a bathtub is difficult, so it probably works best with something on top of it. Wool tends to smell when damp and works best in a dry climate.

As a pillow, any sort of rolled-up or folded piece of cotton could be used, such as towels or T-shirts. Some use a T-shirt as a pillowcase.

As a comforter, you can try cotton blankets or a queen-size mattress pad. Some people have trouble with organic cotton. It is less processed and has an odor that probably is the cotton oil going rancid. Sometimes, regular unbleached cotton works best.

Occasionally, estate sales may offer cotton pieces that are over 60 years old, from before cotton was heavily pesticided — but watch out for mold and mothballs.

### **Other Bedding Materials**

Some folks don't do well with cotton in any form, and must use other materials. Silk is an expensive option that some use, though silk does have a smell to it that might need many washings to be tolerable.

There are two kinds of silk: charmeuse and habatoi. Some like one kind better than the other. They both take a lot of effort to break in; silk is destroyed by sunshine so they cannot be hung on a clothesline for long. It is fragile, so buy a heavy material that can last through the break-in process. In recent years, silks appear to be fumigated and less tolerable than before. Try a cheap piece first.

Down comforters can work in some cases; perhaps an old one is best. It can also be wrapped in a duvet of barrier cloth, which can contain the small pieces of feathers that may work themselves through.

Some people actually end up with some sort of synthetic material, usually well worn. So experiment with an open mind and do not reject options before trying them out.

### **Washing the Bedding**

It is best if all bedding is small enough to fit in a washing machine. It takes a lot longer to make something tolerable by simply airing it out. Make sure you only share a washing machine and clothes dryer with someone who uses tolerable products. Cross-contamination is a real problem that can ruin clothes forever. Don't use a laundromat.

In harder cases, it may work to buy a large pressure cooker and boil the material at a higher temperature. But this will lessen the life of the material.

### **The Bed**

People have used many types of beds to sleep on. Some use a steel hospital bed, which sometimes can be found second hand. This may not work for people who are metal sensitive. A steel bed can sometimes be troublesome if the springs have become magnetized. In that case, you can try using a degaussing coil, but it should only be done by a healthy person as it emits very strong EMF (electro magnetic fields).

Whether using a steel bed is a good idea or not is controversial. Some people think that the metal disturbs our body's natural electromagnetic field. Others believe that metal actually attracts EMF from other sources, such as radio towers. I sleep fine on a steel hospital bed, but you will have to make up your own mind.

A simple wooden bed can be a good choice, especially if found used and free of odors. New ones are available from companies such as LifeKind, and can also be custom-made. New beds do tend to smell of wood terpenes and any paint, varnish or sealer that has been applied to the wood, so a new one will need time to off-gas.

A simple bed can be built from standard lumber, with moderate need for a saw. Make a simple frame of 2x4s, with wooden boards (1x4s) across and nailed or screwed together. Make sure there is an air gap between the boards, to allow for ventilation from underneath to deter mold growth. The frame can be lifted off the ground in various ways, such as by mounting legs on them, or put it on top of a frame of vertical boards. A very simple method is to place the bed frame on top of four concrete blocks.

Test the lumber for tolerance before proceeding. Most lumber is odorous and can be a problem. Lumber is most commonly either pine or hemfir, sometimes Douglas fir. Most people are very bothered by pine. Less odorous varieties are maple and poplar, which may be special ordered at a lumberyard.

Some people have slept on top of a table, which can work very well. Others have used old wooden pallets on the floor. Some have taped over the exposed wood with foil and aluminum tape.

Sleeping directly on the floor is rarely a good idea. Both the floor covering (wood, linoleum, carpet) may be a problem when so close, and in many climates there are various insects and other small critters that roam the floor at night, even in the most well-kept houses.

## **Hammocks**

Hammocks were used on ships until a century ago. They are still commonly used in tropical climates to sleep in, because they are comfortable and cool. They are cool because there is ventilation to all sides, while a regular bed provides a lot of insulation downwards. A hammock is thus only practical in a well-heated room or outside on a hot summer night. It will take a lot of extra bedding to make a hammock warm on a cool night.

Hammocks are available in cotton and in various shapes. The South American style completely surrounds the person, which makes it impossible to fall out during sleep. The style more common in North America has a brace that makes it almost flat, so it is easier to get out of, but also easier to flip over.

Some hammocks are probably treated with mold retardants and other chemicals.

## **Bathtubs**

Bathtubs are old standbys for EIs, when all else fails. They have a hard surface that can be cleaned well, but they are also hard and cold and not very comfortable. Towels or other bedding can improve on things, but it will never be comfortable.

One woman in Southern California slept in a bathtub filled with sand for a while. She buried herself completely in the sand, which both acted as bedding and comforter. This would probably only work in a warm room. If the sand gets too cold, the sleeper could die of hypothermia.

## **Cots**

Some people sleep on old Army or camping cots they have found. New ones are usually problematic until the canvas has off-gassed all the chemicals it has been treated with, which can take several years. The cots are usually not designed so the canvas can be removed for washing.

Some cots have a lot of metal springs across them, instead of a piece of canvas. The cot then usually comes with a removable foam pad to put on top. The foam pad can be thrown out and replaced by a stack of mattress pads or the like. In some cases, people have been able to air out such a foam pad.

## **Sleeping Bags**

A sleeping bag is very handy, both at home and when traveling. They are either made of cotton or some synthetic material, usually nylon, with either down or some synthetic stuffing. The cotton bags all seem to be treated with some nasty chemicals (presumably flame retardants, fungicides, waterproofing, etc.), which are impossible to get out. I tried for three years with a Coleman bag, before giving up.

The synthetic bags can be very nasty too, although they may be easier to wash than a bulky cotton bag. Wiggy's is a brand of bags that uses their own patented process, which somehow makes it more tolerable. Many EIs happily sleep in them after a few washings, and unlike most manufacturers, Wiggy's encourages their customers to wash their bag regularly. From personal experience, about two out of three EIs who try them can use them.

A cotton sleeping bag liner may help, if nylon is bothersome.

## **Outdoor Sleeping**

Lots of us have slept outside on porches and balconies, on a table or dresser that is pushed against an open window, or even just with our heads sticking out the door.

Mosquitoes and other flying insects can be a big problem, and mosquito netting is usually too toxic to be used. A good alternative is to use tullie, the netting used as an underskirt on wedding dresses. It is made of nylon or polyester, but may be tolerable. Otherwise, look for pieces of cotton gauze or other flimsy material.

## Keeping Warm

Keeping warm in bed can be a challenge, especially if it is hard to find tolerable bedding or the room is cold. Here are some well-tried methods to keep warm at night:

Get a large glass bottle, like the one-gallon (3.8 liter) jugs they sell apple juice in. If you don't want to drink the contents, dump it! Fill the bottle with hot water from the faucet and put on the cap. Make sure the cap is snug, but do not over-tighten it, as that will make it leak. Then take the bottle to bed with you. It is amazing how much it helps. If you need a lot of heat, take two bottles. Place it between your legs, or you can put it between you and the wall. You can make them stand up, if you are concerned about leakage. As the water cools, the cap will fit even more snugly.

Several one-litre glass jars can also be used, but it is more work. They can be put in socks, which are easier to handle and will hold the glass together if dropped on the floor.

Another method is to put small river rocks on a cookie sheet in the oven, and then put them in a pillow case and take that to bed.

To add insulation below, perhaps insert some layers of Reflectix/Astro Foil or camping mattresses under the bedding. Or even sandwiched in between, to seal them up.

Covering up the head and the feet are most important. We lose a lot of heat from the bare head, and the feet tend to get cold. Some EIs sleep with a dog to stay warm at night.

Another tried-and-true method is to make a small heat tent over the bed, or around it. This prevents air movement and will actually keep the surrounding air several degrees warmer, all by itself. If you need more heat, take a small lamp in with you. A 25 watt lamp will provide a lot of extra heat, while a larger lamp will be a fire hazard. The tent can be made of many tolerable materials, such as cotton sheets, aluminum foil, mylar (space blankets), Reflectix/Astro Foil, Tu-Tuff, etc.

## Electricity

Some EIs get more restful sleep if their bed is away from all electrical things, such as electric heaters, battery chargers, cordless phones, cell phones, electric clocks, breaker panels, etc.

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*Now I have slept in some bizarre beds.  
Some of the strangest places I've laid my head.  
Just like drawing water from the waterless,*

*It's hard to get good rest.*

*--from "Songs from a Porcelain Trailer"  
by Kim Palmer*

## **Resource List**

Allergy Buyers Club  
[www.allergybuyersclub.com](http://www.allergybuyersclub.com)  
1-888-236-7231

Beyond Beds  
[www.beyondbeds.com](http://www.beyondbeds.com)  
1-888-774-4046

American Environmental Health Foundation  
8345 Walnut Hill Lane, Suite 225  
Dallas, TX 75231  
[www.aehf.com](http://www.aehf.com)  
1-800-428-2343

Cotton Plus  
1-866-784-0374

Hammocks.com  
1-866-577-3529

LifeKind  
333 Crown Point Circle 100  
Grass Valley, CA 95945  
[www.lifekind.com](http://www.lifekind.com)  
1-800-284-4983

Janice's  
[www.janices.com](http://www.janices.com)  
1-800-526-4237

Vivetique Sleep Systems  
[www.vivetique.com](http://www.vivetique.com)  
1-800-365-6563

Wiggy's  
2482 Industrial Blvd.  
P.O. Box 2124  
Grand Junction, CO 81502  
[www.wiggys.com](http://www.wiggys.com)  
1-866-411-6465