

# Heavy sleepers

Weighted blankets were originally designed to soothe children with autism. Now, they're being sold by John Lewis as cosy bedding. **Clare Vooght** reports



**S**leep sells. According to a 2017 McKinsey report, the sleep-health industry is estimated to be worth between \$30bn (£24bn) and \$40bn (£32bn) – and joining the market for products made to improve the quality of your zzzs is the weighted blanket.

Now an Instagram sensation with a dedicated #weightedblanket hashtag clocking 44,500 posts and counting, weighted blankets have made their way from mostly medical use to the latest wellness trend.

The soothing blankets, filled with sand, steel ball bearings, rice, plastic or glass pellets, were first used by medical professionals and recommended on the NHS to help manage the symptoms of conditions such as autism, especially in children. But they've reached the mainstream due to the stress-relieving benefits and cossetting effects.

And this week John Lewis became the first high-street retailer in the UK to stock the blankets, as customers become increasingly willing to part with their cash for relaxation and a good night's rest.

The retailer noted a growth in sales of sleep products in the past year, including a 33 per cent rise in sales of mattresses-in-a-box and a 122 per cent increase for Lumie Bodyclock SAD Lights, which mimics sunrise and sunset.

Unna Patel, a buyer for the de-



partment store, says: "The rise of social media and wellbeing podcasts has provided inspiration around how to live a calm and peaceful life. Investing in products which improve daily wellbeing and quality of sleep is a growing priority for many of our customers."

The quilted cotton John Lewis blankets will set you back £60, and come in a neutral grey shade and are made with weighted glass beads. The retailer follows a slew of online companies that

have launched in the past year or so selling luxury versions of the blankets, including Mela Comfort, whose £124.99 grey cotton and glass-pellet blankets come with a soft textured cover and, like many mattress-in-a-box brands, a 100-night trial.

Sumo Sleep – a similarly premium blanket seller that was founded in October last year by husband-and-wife team, Abeer Iqbal and Azka Malik – was born out of insomnia. "My wife has had

trouble sleeping for as long as I've known her," says Iqbal.

"We had read some things [about weighted blankets] online," he adds. "However, they weren't comfortable, they felt more like medical devices. We thought there must be a way to make this more comfortable."

Their blankets come in a natural bamboo for warmer nights (£169) alongside a regular quilted option (£159), both in grey and navy.

Sumo Sleep customers report using the blankets to ease conditions including ADHD, PTSD, sensory processing disorder, pain from fibromyalgia, restless leg syndrome, autism and general insomnia. But the leading reason for buying a blanket, Iqbal adds, is to reduce anxiety and stress.

"And lately, we're noticing customers want to improve their overall sleep wellness," he says.

People tend to use the blankets in bed, in place of a duvet, or otherwise wrapped around them or placed over the legs while relaxing on the sofa. Suzy Reading, a psychologist and yoga teacher, uses a Mela Comfort blanket during daily yoga sessions.

"From my experience as a yoga teacher, we often use props that add weight to our practice, so it's something that is quite ancient in its origins," says Reading. "From a perspective of your nervous system, it's very soothing and very calming, and it's all about creating that feeling of being held, which is ultimately very relaxing – then of course it's going to promote better sleep."

**Weighted blankets were originally designed for medical use before they were snapped up by people wanting a good night's sleep**



**It's about creating a feeling of being held, which is ultimately very relaxing**



## The theory behind weighted blankets?

We asked clinical scientist and founder of @thewombeffect, an educational platform for parents, Dr Nauf AlBendar PhD

### How do the blankets work?

The idea behind weighted blankets is the offer of pressure stimulation, in the form of a deep touch or a hug. This can provide a calming and grounding experience by releasing feel-good hormones such as serotonin, which help decrease the activity in our nervous system and gives us that feeling of wellbeing.

### How do the blankets fare in medical studies?

The research on weighted blankets and sleep is quite sparse. A recent study has also found that people with moderate insomnia slept longer and moved less when using a weighted blanket. But the study involved just 32 participants with no control group and was funded by the blanket makers. There is much more research needed.

### How are blankets used in a medical setting?

Weighted blankets are one of the sensory tools commonly used in psychiatric units and occupational therapy to help comfort restless individuals. Sleep and anxiety issues are common in people with autism spectrum disorder. But a 2014 study found that the use of a weighted blanket did not help autistic children sleep longer, fall asleep faster, or wake less often. However, the weighted blanket was favoured by the children and their parents.

### Are there any negative effects of weighted blankets?

Weighted blankets are generally safe to use, but they do pose a suffocation risk for children under three. If you're interested in purchasing one research suggests a target of 7-12 per cent of your body weight. People with respiratory and chronic medical conditions should check with their GP.

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