

Room to Improve



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Published: November 29, 2007

Q. How can I freshen up my sofa without reupholstering it or resorting to slipcovers?

A. First, look at the specific details that do not work. "If you've got a skirt that's looking a little tired, pull that skirt off," said Andrew Flesher, a principal with the interior design firm Gunkelman Flesher. "It's an instant streamlining effect that could help lighten up the design."

If you remove the skirt and discover the legs are not in good shape, you can change them. "A sofa's legs can get really worn over time," said Lisa Aharam, a designer in Minneapolis whose work has been featured on HGTV. "Adding new legs can really update the couch's silhouette. If your sofa has thin traditional legs that look a little outdated, replace them with chunkier block legs, which are more contemporary."

There are plenty of online sources for sofa legs, like Bing's (bingltd.com) and rockler.com. Home Depot and Lowe's also have a good selection.

Focus on the cushions next. "A lot of times, when a couch is looking a little worn, the main issue is saggy cushions," Mr. Flesher said. "Refilling them can rejuvenate the look and make the couch a lot more comfortable."

This is best done by a professional upholsterer. Depending on whether you choose a polyester-blend fill or down (more expensive, but longer lasting and more comfortable), it can set you back from about \$200 to nearly \$500, but that is still less than it would cost to reupholster the sofa or to buy a new one.

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Firmer, more comfortable cushions will not help if the fabric is worn out. Mr. Flesher suggested having the cushions re-covered in a contrasting color or pattern or in a similar color but different texture, like leather cushions on a fabric sofa. "It'll give the whole thing a fresh, tonal look rather than the same thing throughout," he said. Unless you are particularly dexterous, leave this job to an upholsterer.

Another way to add warmth to a sofa is by adding pillows. Mr. Flesher recommended choosing complementary or boldly contrasting colors. Williams-Sonoma Home's faux animal print pillows come in elegantly neutral colors, but the prints are dynamic enough to wake up a dull sofa (\$225 at wshome.com). Ikea sells solid-colored pillows like the Granat (for \$3.99) in bright green, red and blue, among other colors.

Skip Sroka, an interior designer in Washington, D.C., suggested keeping many different types of pillows on hand so they could be rotated seasonally to create a new look. "It's instant redecoration," he said, "and keeps things interesting."

Throws are another easy fix, he said, "as functional and cozy as they are decorative." He suggested Garnet Hill as a source for throws that would "fit in with both modern and traditional décor." The woven cashmere throw (\$298 at garnethill.com) comes in colors like robin's-egg blue and cabernet. The wool fisherman's cable throw (\$148), in colors like chocolate and evergreen, calls to mind a favorite sweater.

Here is one final strategy from the New York designer Noel Jeffrey: "If you want to make your sofa look better, forget your sofa and repaint the walls," he said. "If your neutral sofa's looking tired, neutral wall colors around it will only make it all blur together. A bold, bright wall color will take some of the focus off the sofa and will frame the whole thing with a new, fresh perspective."

If you like red, try Farrow & Ball's Blazer or Rectory Red (farrow-ball.com), or experiment with a deep, bright blue like Sherwin-Williams's Pulsating Blue, Hyper Blue or Blueblood (sherwin-williams.com).

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