

Shedding Light: Choosing the right bulb for your home

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Remember years ago when you would go to the hardware store or grocery store to shop for light bulbs? Aside from a few size and watt differences, they all pretty much looked and functioned the same way. Those days are long gone. Go shopping for light bulbs today and you will be confronted with a slew of different styles, watts, colors and types. It can be easy to get overwhelmed with all the choices. Which one is the right choice for me? This handy light bulb guide can help illuminate the choices for those looking to replace a burnt out bulb or upgrade to better ones.

Incandescent Bulb

These have been around since the days of Thomas Edison. For most, when they think about light bulbs, this is still what they think about. These are traditional and used to be almost the only option out there.

Pros: Bulbs work well and give off bright, warm light. They're very inexpensive, so it's easy to put these in fixtures all over the house and not break the bank with the initial investment.

Cons: These bulbs are the least energy efficient of the bunch. The bulbs use a great deal of energy to give off light, and even worse, the vast majority of power required to provide the desired brightness is given off through heat rather than light. That's why these bulbs get so hot to the touch when used for a long time. In addition, these bulbs don't have a very long life. While it might feel like you're saving money because of how inexpensive they are, you likely will come out worse in the long run because of the increased energy usage and decreased life.

Note: Remember the Easy-Bake Oven? Up until 2011, this toy used an incandescent light bulb as its heat source for cooking. Did you ever have a lava lamp in your dorm room? The lava lamp gets its effect by warmed wax rising in the contained liquid and then falling back to the bottom of the base as the wax cools again and loses buoyancy. How does that wax get warmed? You guessed it: the incandescent bulb.

Compact Fluorescent Light (CFL) Bulb

Many remember when these first came out on the market. They were easy to spot because of the pig-tail design of the bulb. While that spiral can still be found, you are no longer limited to that design as CFLs now come in many different shapes and sizes.

Pros: These bulbs are about 75 percent more efficient than standard incandescent light bulbs. In addition, that light comes without as much as heat. That means the bulb won't get as hot and your air conditioner won't have to fight so much to cool the area of heat coming from the bulbs. In recent years, these bulbs have taken much of the shelf space that used to be for incandescent bulbs. CFLs used to be noted for their high prices, but they have come down substantially. While they are still more expensive than your standard bulb,

they also last much longer, making them a better buy in the long run and still less expensive than other options.

Cons: The initial investment might be a little bit more, but it will pay off with patience. While these are very energy efficient and long lasting, there are options out there known to be more efficient and have a longer life. These bulbs used to be well known for not working with dimmer switches. They do make CFL bulbs that work with a dimmer but not all do. Make sure to look on the packaging to see if it works with a dimmer switch should you need it.

Note: These bulbs contain mercury. That means you aren't supposed to throw them in the trash when they burn out. Instead, you need to recycle them. Most recycling centers accept CFLs.

Light Emitting Diode (LED) Bulb

The trend in bulbs seems to be going more and more in the direction of LEDs. Their presence has started to become ubiquitous, whether it be for the display on your electronics, traffic lights, glowsticks, Christmas lights, televisions, flashlights and so much more. One of the key advantages of LEDs, which contributes to their versatility, is their small size. It means that LEDs can be used in very small things and has allowed televisions to get thinner and thinner. There are even smart LED bulbs on the market that can be controlled through an app on the phone or through a smart home device. As one would expect, the smart LED bulbs tend to be much more expensive but have a lot more functions.

Pros: When it comes to long life and energy efficiency, LEDs just can't be beat. While the most efficient CFL bulbs might be close to the efficiency of some LED bulbs, the edge goes to LEDs when it comes to life. Reports indicate that LEDs can last thousands of hours longer than CFLs. That amounts to a lot of savings over the lifetime of the bulb's life. Like CFLs, these bulbs radiate very little heat.

Cons: The biggest con is price. While these bulbs have started to come down quite a bit in price, they are still more expensive than the other types of bulbs. Many people complain about the low lumen output of some LED bulbs. Lumen refers to the amount of visible light emitted from a source. Light quality from the bulbs seems to vary depending on manufacturer, so you might want to do a little research to know if the bulb you chose is known for producing more light. Otherwise, you might find you need additional bulbs or a higher wattage bulb.

The days when bulbs were just for light are gone. Now there are so many things to consider when you go to replace that light bulb. What you ultimately choose depends a lot on the need. For many, the idea of a smart bulb is ludicrous, while others will embrace the opportunity for customization and automation. At least now you can go to the light bulb aisle with a little more understanding of the different options currently out there.