

# Why I Avoid MDF and Furniture Built with MDF (and Think You Should, Too)

Something has been bothering me. I haven't really gotten into it on the blog, but the case studies I'm doing on the furniture industry makes me very uncomfortable. For the past couple of decades, there has been a drastic increase in the percentage of consumer furniture and goods manufactured using a material known as MDF. The average guy on the street probably isn't familiar with the term, so it is understandable some of you might be asking, "What is MDF?". It is an acronym for Medium Density Fiberboard. [mainbodyad]Technically, MDF contains a mixture of wood solids, wax, and resin bonded together under high temperatures and high pressure to create a uniform wood-like product that is far cheaper than real wood. In layman terms, MDF is sawdust held together with glue; sort of a higher quality (that's an oxymoron, in my opinion) material that serves as the base for the piece-of-crap furniture you get from office supply stores or certain shall-not-be-named furniture chains. I've heard some individual furniture makers say they believe casegood furniture constructed out of a core of MDF might have a life span of 1/10th or 1/4th that of something made from solid wood, properly constructed. To be fair, it also costs roughly 1/4 to 1/10th as much as real world.

If that weren't bad enough, much MDF is manufactured using formaldehyde, a known human carcinogen. Cutting, sanding, or releasing particles of MDF into the air might be a high risk and should be avoided. If the furniture isn't properly sealed, the MDF materials can leak formaldehyde for years, pumping it into your home or office. Why on Earth would you want something like that in your life? Your kids sleeping in it? Your family hanging out by it? Your air filled with it? It's asinine. Do a quick Google search on the topic to learn more. It's scary.

## Are Manufacturers Purposely Selling MDF Furniture to Unwitting Customers?

Manufacturers and retailers now sell furniture constructed using MDF as a core material, then cover it with a thin sheet of real wood veneer. For complex pieces of veneer work, I understand all of the arguments about using MDF as a substrate for veneering and, fine, I get it. I don't like it, and I wouldn't be too keen on buying a piece with it, but okay.

However, I believe that many consumers see the real wood and have no idea that he or she paid thousands of dollars for, what I consider to be, a giant pile of sawdust that could not hope to compare to a solid wood alternative. They are going by brand names of furniture companies that were quality in the past, not realizing that those businesses are no longer selling the same product!

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It doesn't even occur to many consumers that they are buying MDF, a type of engineered wood product, not real wood.

In other words, I am of the opinion that manufacturers of many mid-tier and higher-end furniture brands unknowingly switched their product without adequately disclosing it to the consumer. It would be like if your favorite hamburger joint slowly replaced the core of the hamburger with wood-like filler product, but failed to tell you. Instead, they bragged about using the "real" meat, which is true; they just use a tiny layer of it for the visible parts of the sandwich.

The MDF question gets tricky when it comes to certain veneered furniture. I fell in love with a pair of carved wooden bookcases featuring gold-leaf accented pineapples. I had intended to buy several sets for my office since my primary responsibility is to read and make decision. Bookcases are really the most useful piece of furniture I own, besides a desk.

The bookcases are manufactured by one of the best names in the furniture business, with one of the best reputations for furniture quality. The price tag was not insignificant (it was in the four-figures per bookcase; we'll leave it at that). In order to alleviate that tiny bit of doubt in the back of my mind, I wrote the company and asked if the bookcases contained any MDF. Their response? *The entire thing was built on an MDF core!* Sure, it is supposedly a high end MDF product but the idea bothers me. We're not talking Walmart or IKEA here; we're talking a furniture company that makes individual pieces more expensive than some cars. Yet, when you're dealing with a rare, expensive veneerers, there are woodworkers who emphatically insist it is the only way to go, substrate-wise. I still can't bring myself to pull the trigger on the purchase because the presence of MDF bothers me that much. (They are so beautiful I'll probably end up buying them, anyway.)

What bothers me more? I find the fact that the use of MDF as a core material wasn't disclosed prior to me asking completely inexcusable. How many people take the time to write? I think most reasonable people assume that furniture that looks like wood is, in fact,

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wood. That may no longer be the case. That, to me, is an ethical failing. It may be legal under the current laws, but it isn't *right*. It isn't how a company should behave.

## This Isn't the First Time an Industry Has Tried to Cut Corners By Using MDF

Back in the 1990's, there was a class action lawsuit when one particular company sold MDF as siding on households. Long story short, it began to rot and get infected with fungus once it got wet from the rain.

[mainbodyad]From a product liability standpoint, I'm shocked that a lot of businesses are willing to engage in the distribution of items containing a lot of MDF. Although I'm not convinced we're in asbestos territory, even with the formaldehyde cancer risk, I do think that MDF is a ticking financial time bomb waiting to happen in terms of class action lawsuits, *especially* in cases where the consumer had no reasonable cause to believe that the furniture contained, or was primarily constructed out of, MDF. I think that is true, even if it turns out that MDF poses no safety risks whatsoever. (Do you remember the lawsuits caused by asbestos? People who were hardly sick were able to bankrupt entire companies because of things that happened 40 years prior!). Trying to save a few bucks could end up costing a few thousand. At least, that's where I see it going in the end. I hope I'm wrong. To be more blunt about it, I would **not** be comfortable with a large percentage of my net worth in any company that manufactured or distributed a lot of MDF products. I think there is a contingent liability issue there from dust particles and outgas risk that no one is discussing or acknowledging outside of the woodworking community. Again, I hope I'm wrong.

## There Will Always Be Room for Quality

The big question: When did people think it was okay to start producing and selling trash? In the piano industry, Steinway and Bosendorfer have both managed to survive just fine. You don't see them making the pianos out of MDF. Why do furniture makers take less pride in their work? Why do they think so little of themselves, and their legacy, that they think this is an acceptable compromise?

I think the government should require any product containing or constructed with MDF to carry a notice label. The consumer has a right to know what he or she is buying. Putting a nice veneer on a cheap substrate is like replacing the interior components of a Lexus with an Edsel and still trying to sell it as a Lexus. It goes against my sense of fairness and honesty. For me, it is further proof that [buying high quality furniture can save money in the long-run](#) and that you should only do business with companies that are upfront with you. To learn more about MDF, [head over here and skip directly to the comments section](#).

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