



# Choosing a bra

Help and advice for older and disabled people on choosing a bra including sizing, accessories, adaptations and accessories

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DLF Factsheet

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# INTRODUCTION

Bras are designed to contain the breasts and give shape and support. Breasts are a part of the body shape of a woman and, therefore, of her sexuality. Perception of size or change of shape can have profound psychological effects.

Choosing a bra can thus become quite a complex matter, and can be complicated further by a non-average body shape, weak hands and fingers or other such difficulty. Some women decide not to wear a bra for a number of reasons, but those who perspire a lot or have heavy breasts could have problems with soreness or even ulceration underneath.

Breasts change shape over time, particularly after childbirth and with age, so it is a good idea to be measured and fitted regularly, or certainly if some change has been noted.

Bras are complex garments. Bra designers have to solve the engineering problem of bounce and there are up to 58 pieces of work to be done when making a bra. They are usually made of cotton, polyester, nylon or mixed fibres and elasticised with Elastane or Lycra. Those people with eczema should choose bras made of cotton; the area containing Elastane can be lined with silk or fine cotton. Cups are formed in various ways, in one, two or three sections. One-section cups are moulded; three-section cups give added support with a seam underneath the breast. People with sensitive nipples

should avoid seams where possible. Side support is usually provided by bones (now metal or nylon strips) although some use cut and fabric only.

# SIZING

It is always advisable for your comfort and breast health to be measured and fitted by a qualified bra fitter. Look in your local phone directory for your nearest specialist shop, or ask the lingerie department of your nearest department store. Some experts say that you should measure the breasts without a bra as a badly fitted bra will give inaccurate measurements, but for those with a large bust this also may not give an accurate result.

Measure the chest under the bust for bra size. Measure the fullest part of the bust for cup size.

If the cup size is the same as the bra size you will probably need an A or AA cup size. The cup size then goes up the alphabet with each extra inch on the cup measurement. Expert opinions vary on the exact cup size required related to measurements so a professional fitting is the best way to identify the correct size bra. There are such a variety of styles and fit that you need to try on a selection to find one that is comfortable and supportive for you.

## STYLES AND TYPES OF BRA

Strapless bras support from beneath and may give relief to those with painful shoulders.

Multi way bras are sold with a selection of straps that can be used to create a traditional, halter neck or backless strap style bra. This is useful if shoulder pain or body shape makes bras uncomfortable to wear or if different strap positions make it easier to get on and off.

T-back or racer-back bra straps do not fall off the shoulders, and may accommodate sloping shoulders. These styles tend to be front-fastening.

**Mastectomy bras.** Many women who have had mastectomies have found that they do not need special bras but, for those who prefer them, these are available from the NHS. They normally have a pocket to contain the prosthesis. Those who prefer a standard bra should choose a style with high underarm contours, wide adjustable shoulder straps and strong elastic side panels with some support for the prosthesis. A pocket should not be necessary, but can be provided on the NHS. A criss-cross of ribbon is an alternative to a pocket. For more information on prostheses, bras and beachwear for women who have had breast surgery, contact Breast Cancer Care (see 'Useful organisations').

## LENGTH

Bras are normally available in three lengths, short, midi and long. Long length bras give the greatest support to a heavy bust but need to fit well around the body for comfort. They sometimes have hooks to fasten onto a corset and so prevent the bra from riding up. Bras are normally fastened with hooks and eyes. The number of hooks and eyes normally depends upon the length.

## FASTENINGS

Back-fastening bras are commonly available but some women find them difficult to manage.

Front-fastening bras are available up to sizes E and F. Most front fastening bras are made with small hooks and eyes, but one company now makes a front fastening bra with magnetic fasteners with loops to help when gripping the fabric. Contact your nearest clothing advice service for details.

Sleep bras are normally front fastening or pull on, and give soft support. They usually have a high back with wide straps. Soft Pull-on bras give little support but usually have wide straps and no fastenings. They can be put on over the head or held by the shoulder straps and pulled on over feet and legs and up the body slipping arms in on the way up to avoid some shoulder movement. These bras can be bought in cotton or silk jersey fabric, which is soft and helps to maintain

a steady body temperature, they may be of use to women who get sore from perspiring under their breasts, but their lack of support maybe a problem.

Sports bras give support with full freedom of movement, and are often T-back or racer back. They are put on over the head or over the feet and legs and pulled upwards. The high Lycra content can make them too inflexible if you have difficulty dressing and undressing.

## **STRAPS**

Shoulder pain can often be exacerbated by bra straps, especially if heavy breasted. Try and chose a bra with wide straps to spread the pressure.

Adjustable straps can be adapted to adjust either with Velcro, buckles or rings.

Stretch straps allow for comfort and easy movement.

Non-stretch straps may be best if the bust is heavy, but may also cut into the shoulders.

Cushion pads are often incorporated into the non-stretch straps of larger cup size bras to protect shoulders.

## **OTHER FEATURES**

Underwiring gives support, but may dig in or cause pressure areas to develop.

## **ACCESSORIES**

Padded or gel cushioned shoulder guards can help to prevent straps from cutting into the shoulders.

Straps can be bought to convert a bra to a low back bra; the advantage of these straps is that they cross over at the back and fasten at the front.

Strap retainers can be fixed into outerwear shoulder seams to retain straps, or can be bought to hold straps together at the back.

Bra extenders extend the width of a bra by up to 4 1/2 inches by hooking on to an existing back fastener.

## **ALTERNATIVES: TWO-IN-ONE GARMENTS**

Liberty bodice (bra and vest): gives no bust support and suspenders can be attached, they are normally front buttoning.

Corselet/pantee corselet (bra and corset with or without suspenders): pull-on or fastening pantee corselet incorporates pants. These are usually difficult to put on, but their side fasteners may be easier for some than a back fastening bra. If crutchless versions are worn then soft pants can be worn over the corset for easy removal during the day when using the toilet.

Secret support-tops: these vests or T-shirts have a supportive lining of elastic and jersey fabric so can be worn in place of a bra, giving some support and can be pulled on over the feet like pants, which helps if shoulder movement is restricted. They do not offer adequate support to women with heavier breasts and do not separate the breasts.

Bra-slips (bra and petticoat): Avoids back fasteners. Can be shortened to make a bra camisole.

Teddy or body shaper (all in one): fastens underneath the crotch, normally with poppers or hooks and eyes.

Basque (bra, corset and suspender belt): often lace up in front.

## TO MAKE DRESSING EASIER

Replace fabric shoulder straps with soft lingerie elastic.

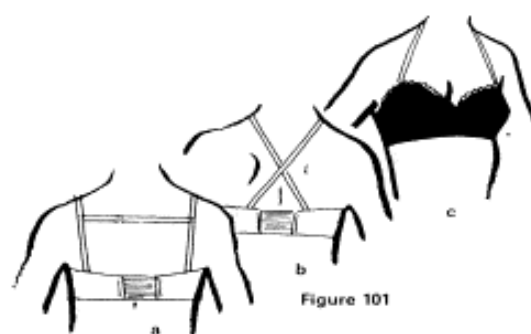
If the wearer can no longer fasten back fastening bras but does not wish to buy new ones, they can be fastened at the front and turned around.

Fastening bras with one hand is best done seated. Front-fastening bras are the easiest but back fastening bras can be turned round.

Pull on soft pull-On bras over the feet to avoid too much shoulder movement.

## ADAPTATIONS

To prevent straps slipping off the shoulders a piece of elastic may be stitched between both straps across the back (figure **101a**).



Other possibilities include lengthening and crossing the straps at the back (figure **101b**) or fastening them round the neck (figure **101c**). The first two alterations are more suitable if the bra fastens at the front.

A back-fastening bra can be adapted to open at the front (contact your nearest clothing advice service for details). Trousers or corset hooks and eyes can be substituted for the original fastenings or a 'D' ring with Velcro for strong support.

Hooks and eyes may be easier to fasten if the fabric strip behind the eyes is stitched back out of the way but this may cause rubbing against the skin.

Tape loops sewn onto each side of the front opening enable the wearer to slip thumbs through and hook the fastening

when fine movements are not possible.

Buttons used with button loops made of shearing elastic may be easier to handle than hooks and eyes.

Zip adaptations make it possible to fasten a bra using only one hand. An elastic loop at the bottom end of the zip will need to be fastened to a button sewn on the lower garment before the zip can be closed. The upper end of the zip could be held in the teeth whilst it is closed.

## **AVAILABILITY/ SOURCES**

Check high street stores and mail order catalogues for availability of the products mentioned above. Contact your local department store for details of bra fitting services. Alternatively, contact your nearest clothing advice service for details of suppliers.

## **USEFUL ORGANISATIONS**

Breast Cancer Care  
5-13 Great Suffolk Street  
London  
SE1 0NS  
Tel: **0845 092 0800** .  
Email: [info@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:info@breastcancercare.org.uk)  
Website: [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

Clothing Advice and Information Service  
The Independent Living Centre  
Isca House,  
Haven Road,

Exeter EX2 8DS  
Tel. 01392 687276  
Website [www.devon.gov.uk/ilc](http://www.devon.gov.uk/ilc)  
Contact: Philippa Greenslade  
The Style Centre  
Redbank House  
4 St Chads Street  
Cheetham  
Manchester M8 8QA  
Tel: 0870 770 2866  
Fax: 0870 770 5813  
Textphone: 0161 770 5813  
Email: [general.info@assist-uk.org](mailto:general.info@assist-uk.org)  
Website: [www.assist-uk.org](http://www.assist-uk.org)

### **Clothing workshops and dressmakers**

Bassetlaw Fashion Services  
Unit 7 Canalside Workshops  
Leverton Road  
Retford  
Nottingham DN22 ODR  
Tel: 01777 860 206

Clothing Solutions for Disabled  
People  
Unit 1 Jubilee Mills  
30 North Street  
Bradford BD1 4EW  
Tel and Fax: 01274 746739  
Email:  
[enquiries@clothingsolutions.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@clothingsolutions.org.uk)  
Website:  
[www.clothingsolutions.org.uk](http://www.clothingsolutions.org.uk)

Special Occasions Clothes  
27 Donald Road  
London E13 0QF  
Tel: 020 84704868  
Contact: Cryn Horn

**We would like to thank the Clothing  
Advice Service at the Independent  
Living Centre in Exeter for assistance  
in updating these factsheets.**



## DLF online

The majority of DLF's advice is now online. If you would like advice and support to get online or information on local courses about getting online please visit one of the following websites.

### **Age UK**

<http://www.ageuk.org.uk/work-and-learning/technology-and-internet/>

Call **0800 169 8787**

### **BBC Webwise**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/>

Call **08000 150 950**

### **Digital Unite**

<http://learning.digitalunite.com/category/using-the-internet/>

Call **0800 228 9272** Or you can write to them

Digital Unite Limited, Unit 2B Poles Copse, Poles Lane, Otterbourne, Winchester, SO21 2DZ

### **Go On**

<http://www.go-on.co.uk/>

Call 0800 77 1234

UK online centres, The Quadrant, 99 Parkway Avenue, Parkway Business Park, Sheffield, S9 4WG

### **UK Online Centre**

<http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/>

