

Bras: Find your fit

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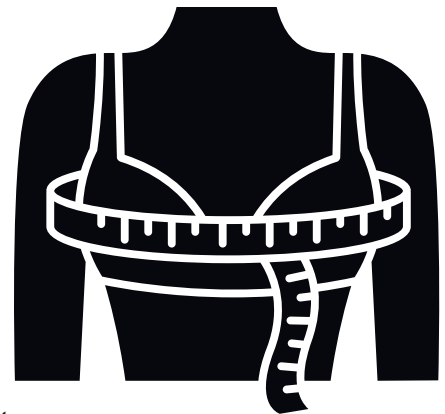
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A bra, or “brassiere” as it’s more formally known, is “an undergarment to cover and support the breasts.” This definition makes the concept of a bra sound simple, yet this garment can be annoyingly complicated. Bras are often associated with etiquette, confusion, and discomfort. Wear a bra or not? It is a personal choice but is usually influenced by cultural expectations and societal norms. Some researchers conclude a bra is necessary for optimal breast health, while others say the opposite. Myths are plentiful. There is evidence that a well-fitting, supportive bra is beneficial depending on the breast size and the activity a person is doing. The emphasis here should be on “well-fitting” and “supportive.” A bra that fits properly can enhance your overall look and increase confidence. Bras should feel comfortable, and they should not require continual adjustment or tugging throughout the day. To learn more about bras, review our Cooperative Extension publication, “Finding the Right Bra” (FCS2-845). Below are some additional tips for bra selection and caring for these garments.

Size and fit

With so many size combinations and styles, it’s no wonder that more than half of all women wear the wrong bra size. It is recommended to be professionally measured about once a year or after a change in weight. Not everyone is comfortable having another person measure their chest, but keep in mind that someone who is specially trained to take these measurements can usually help you find a bra that fits you best. Bra fitting can be a very sensitive topic for some, as it might relate to health and confidence. Fortunately, there are businesses that specialize in bra fitting assistance for those who have had mastectomies, breast reconstruction, or are an irregular shape. Everyone should be treated with dignity during a bra fitting.

If you prefer to measure yourself, grab a flexible tape measure and stand in front of a mirror. Wear an unlined bra or go braless and measure around your chest, just under your bust. The tape measure should be snug and parallel with the ground. This measurement is your band size. Some experts say to add 4 or 5 inches to this value, but ultimately, your band size should be determined by the actual band of the bra you purchase. A proper band size will feel snug (but not tight) and “anchored” while resting parallel to the ground. A new bra should fit securely on the loosest set of hooks. Over time, the elastic stretches and begins to lose its shape, and at this point, the bra can then be fastened on the tighter hooks to maintain that snug feel. So if you measure your band size as a 38, start by



trying on a bra that is labeled with a 38” band – but be ready to go up or down in band size if it does not fit as described above.

Cup size is determined by the difference in measurement of the band size and the bust measurement. Again, measure around your torso, but this time above the band line, at the fullest part of your breasts, making sure the tape measure stays parallel with the ground. This is your bust measurement. Typically, every inch of difference, equates to one bra cup size, beginning with a one-inch difference indicating an A cup, two inches of difference indicating a B cup, and so on. This is a generalized way to approach selecting the correct cup size, but, in reality, the width around our chest at the bust line is just a circumference measurement. Bra cups are three-dimensional and hold the breast volume. And the volume of the cup size is related to the band size. This is where things can get confusing. For example, the volume of the cup of a 38C is the same as a 34DD and a 30F. And when you compare the volume of the cup for a 34DD, the cup volume decreases with a smaller band size and increases with a larger band size, even though the cup is still labeled as DD. For this reason, it is best to try on several bra sizes to see which fits the best.

Not sure how a bra is supposed to fit? Start by “lifting and scooping” the breast into the cup to make sure it is comfortably in place. Underwire cups should fit under the breast. There should not be any gaps in the cup, nor should any breast be “spilling out” over the top or sides. Of course, some minimal “bumps and bulges” are to be expected and are normal, but poking, squeezing, or slipping are not things we want to experience when wearing a bra. The band should be horizontal and parallel with the ground; it should not ride up in the front or the back. Straps should be adjusted so that they do not fall to the sides nor dig into the shoulders.



Style and shape

Depending on breast shape, desired support, wardrobe requirements, or intended activities, we may choose a specific style of bra to meet our needs. There are dozens of different bra styles with varying amounts of coverage, padding, compression, strap placement, and closures that affect the fit and whether it will be visible under clothing. When buying a bra to go under a specific outfit, it’s a good idea to have the outfit with you when trying on the bra. When choosing a style, pay close attention to details such as the width of the straps and their placement. This can impact the amount of “lift” provided. However, know that most of the support of the bra should come from the band below the bustline, and not the straps. Other factors to consider are whether the cups are lined (or have removable padding), molded, or have a seam across the center.

Care and laundering

It may be surprising to learn that frequently worn bras should be replaced after about 12 months of wear. This would apply to the “everyday” style bra that is worn several times a week. Aim to own about three well-fitting, basic bras that are appropriate for most days, and then replace them yearly or as needed. Special occasion bras may last longer if they are not worn as often and continue to fit. It’s time to replace your bra if the elastic begins to fray, if you are now fastening your bra on the smallest size hook, the band is riding up, if the straps keep falling down, or wires start poking out.

Depending on your activity level, you can wear a bra two or three times before it should be washed. This may not be ideal for your lifestyle, but at a minimum, hang your bra on a hook in between wearings so it can air out and the elastic can recover. You may prefer to wash a sports bra after each wear. These tend to get very sweaty; therefore, wearing a clean, dry sports bra can help prevent irritation and skin rashes. The materials and construction methods in many bras are best suited for washing by hand. Place bras in a clean sink or small wash tub filled with lukewarm water and less than a tablespoon of detergent. Gently swish and let soak for an hour; rinse in cold water. Blot on a clean towel, reshape the cups (if necessary), and either lay flat or carefully hang to dry. Machine washing and drying can cause unnecessary elastic stretching and deterioration, fraying, tangling, as well as loss in cup shape. If you choose to machine wash, fasten closures on the bra first, then place into a mesh laundry bag. For best results, place only one or two bras in each mesh laundry bag. Wash using mild detergent on a delicates cycle with other lightweight items that cannot be snagged in case the bras become unhooked (i.e. don’t wash your bras with your sweaters or loose knits). Avoid the dryer and keep in mind it may take at least a day for a bra to thoroughly air dry, therefore it is a good idea to make sure you have another bra to wear.

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