Bra

Are you constantly pulling up your bra straps? Do your shoulders fall forward? Do your bosoms bounce when you walk, despite your new balcony bra with lace trim? The chances are you are among the majority of women who have never had a proper bra fitting and whose posture and back health are compromised as a result.

Attitudes about bra fit and function vary by generation. Younger women are more likely to find that their bra does not fit properly because, in the good old days, pubescent girls were almost always fitted for bras. The idea of being fitted for a bra when I was 13 would have been gross, but everything looks different after my bra epiphany. I was wearing an expensive underwire bra, designed to give "lift."

“I bet your back strap’s halfway up your shoulder blades. Look at your posture! Your bust line is sinking!” My ear lobes, she said, were almost attached to my shoulders. I'd spent years compromising my breast and back health. I told her I'd always been a 36C. “Rubbish,” she snorted. “You're a 30 or 32E.”

All this is not just a matter of vanity. Last week, the British Chiropractic Association warned that wearing the wrong bra size can lead to a number of problems, including back pain, restricted breathing, abrasions, breast pain and poor posture. The problems are even more acute in large-breasted women.

“Bras are like suspension bridges,” says the BCA's Tim Hutchful. “You need a well-engineered bra so your shoulders do not end up doing all the work. Bras that do not fit will affect the shoulders and chest and will almost certainly cause back pain as you get older.”

“Women buy bras off the shelf and do not have a clue what size they are. Some stores offer fittings, but most women do not bother.” She pushed my shoulders down and pulled my blades back, showing me where the strap should sit: on the meaty part of the shoulder toward
the neckline, locking in with the shoulders and streamlining down the back to stop slipping. “It is like the reins on a horse. You pull everything back, not forward,” she says.

The corsetry experts at Rigby & Peller estimate that 80 percent of women who come through their doors are wearing the wrong-sized bra, and they also stress that badly fitting bras can lead to back problems and bad posture. The most common bra solecisms are cups that are too small and bands that are loose around the back causing the shoulders to carry the weight of the bosoms, instead of the back. A bra must be firm (not tight) around the back and support the weight of the breasts in the mid to lower back. Rigby & Peller says the back band should be level with the underwire (Ktori says an inch-and-a-half lower).

Morton Bell, an osteopath, agrees that properly fitting bras is key to back health. “Ladies have to do a balancing act with gravity,” he says. “Proper support for the breasts has a huge impact on back health. The best place to support the breasts is through the lumbar (lower back), but often, women take the strain through the thoracic (around the ribcage), which can cause a curved back. If a woman is bending forward because of insufficient breast support, the trapeziums overstretch and cause headaches. All nerve roots come from the back; stomach upsets and fatigue are common byproducts of bad back health. If ladies have a proper bra-fitting, back problems are often resolved.”

There are even those who have claimed that there is a link between underwire bras and breast cancer. In their book *Dressed to Kill*, Sydney Ross Singer and Soma Grismaijer claim that the external pressure of the bra constricts the lymphatic vessels and prevents proper draining of the breast tissue, leading to fluid accumulation in the breast. Western rates of the disease are 10 times those of developing countries because, they tell us, women in the latter tend not to wear bras, let alone cleavage-heaving cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die wonder bras. They urge women to abandon bras and embrace
freedom, but do not substantiate their claims with any supportive comparisons in diet, lifestyle or genetic history.

The metal in underwire bras is unpopular with acupuncturists because, they say, it crosses the body’s meridians and blocks the flow of chi, which can cause energy to stagnate. But breast cancer? Lynn Daly, from Cancer Research UK, says: “You would need to wear a bra that was painfully and unbearably tight to have any effect on your lymphatic system, but constriction or applying pressure to an area of the body does not cause normal cells to become cancerous.”

“It is not rocket science,” says Ktori. “Saggy bosoms are bad for your back. Get a bra that fits properly. You would not wear shoes that are too tight, would you? Women who have their bra fitted properly tell me it is changed their lives.”

**The Wrong Bra? How You Can Tell**

Kate Horrell, fitting expert for the online lingerie shop figleaves.com, recommends looking closely in the mirror for the telltale signs that you are wearing the wrong bra size.

*The underband is riding up*

Lift up your arms to see whether the bra is tight enough. The underband should fit firmly against the body so that it does not slide about during normal activity.

*The shoulder straps are digging in*

The underband of a bra provides the majority (80 percent) of support for the breasts, with the straps providing just 20 percent. If the bra straps are digging in, it could be because the underband is too loose and you are overadjusting the straps to feel supported. When you do this, the straps pull the bra up at the back, another sign that the band is too loose.

*The center fold is lifting away from the body*
The center front of the bra should lie flat against the body. If it does not, the cups could be too small.

*The back band is overstretched*

If your straps are too far apart at the back (they should be parallel), it may be that your bra band is too small and so is overstretching.