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Is your bra harming your health?

What you're wearing underneath your clothes could have more of an impact on your well-being – both physical and mental – than you think. We investigate whether a bad-fitting bra can hinder your health.

Many women have a years-old bra, now slightly stretched or discoloured, that they love for how comfortable it is. You might also have a bra that you haven't been able to wear more than once because it doesn't feel right – maybe the wires poke in or there's too much padding.

Research has shown that [as many as 80%](#) of us are wearing the wrong bra for our bodies, but why does it matter?

Can your bra cause breast cancer?

There are a whole host of myths out there when it comes to breast health. For years, headlines have cropped up suggesting that wearing bras causes [breast cancer](#).

"Wearing a well-fitting bra has no known negative consequences," says Amy Sanchez, Senior Research Associate in Biomechanics with the [Research Group in Breast Health](#) at the University of Portsmouth. "We often get asked about cancer and bras, and [existing research](#) shows no link between bra use and breast cancer."

While bras don't cause breast cancer, that doesn't mean that they can't impact your health, she continues.

"Wearing an ill-fitting bra can cause poor posture, [back](#) and [neck pain](#), shoulder grooves leading to numbness in the fingers, and a lack of self-confidence."

An uncomfortable bra can have a big impact on body confidence and self-esteem, says Tracey-Jane Hughes, founder of [Bra Lady](#).

"If something is pressing on the breast tissue it can obviously cause discomfort. Sometimes that can cause mental health issues as well. I see a lot of women who don't like their breasts because they find them uncomfortable - all because they are not wearing a well-fitting bra."

With wear, bras stretch and don't provide the same support they had when we first bought them. Our bodies also change over time so it's a good idea to buy new bras regularly.

"A bra will only last for about six months," says Hughes.

Is braless better?

There's a growing trend, particularly among younger women, to turn to non-wired soft-cup bras, fabric 'bralettes' or not wearing a bra. Bralettes in particular have taken the lingerie market by storm with the number of styles of bralettes on the market seeing a [123% increase](#) between 2016 and 2018.

So is an underwire always necessary?

"As far as I am aware there has been little research done specifically on bralettes," says Sanchez. "We have, however, tested several non-wired bras and these can be effective at supporting the breast if constructed well. There are many different materials and techniques used in the bra industry and from my experience, I feel it is no longer essential for a bra to have underwire to provide good support."

Bralettes aren't one size fits all. What works for one woman might not work for another, and sometimes that can lead to pain and problems with the breasts, she continues.

"Wearing no bra or a low-support bra can cause the skin to stretch beyond its elastic limit, leading to permanent deformation and premature sagging of the breast. There is also plenty of research to show that wearing low breast support leads to increased [breast pain](#) and reduced movement efficiency during exercise or physical activity."

Body shape can make all the difference when it comes to buying a bra. "Some women with larger breasts may not get the support they need from a bralette," explains Hughes. "They are likely to end up with neck ache or back ache because it's not supportive enough."

Fit is just as important in bralettes as in traditional bras. "An ill-fitting bra is an ill-fitting bra; it doesn't matter whether it's got wires in or not. A lot of women are going over to soft-cup bras but if you've got an ill-fitting soft-cup bra, that will still do as much damage to your breasts and back and neck as a underwired bra."

How to find your perfect bra

Every woman will have different criteria for their bra, including style, support and comfort. The Research Group in Breast Health advocates a 'best-fit' approach to finding the right bra, using five key criteria:

- **Underband** should fit firmly, pulling away about one inch, and be level all around the torso.
- **Underwire** should follow the breast crease and not sit on any breast tissue.
- **Cups** should fully encase the breast tissue without bulging or gaping.
- **Straps** should sit comfortably on the shoulders, pulling away about one inch.
- **Centre-front** should sit flat against the body.

"If a bra does not meet all these criteria try going up or down a size," says Sanchez.

The underband is crucial to getting the perfect fit. Many women wear the underband too loose and the cup too small. "You wear it around the smallest part of your back. A lot of women are wearing them too high. That means that their breasts aren't being supported," explains Hughes.

"Make sure your breasts are enclosed in the cup. We all have one breast bigger than the other so we always fit the larger breast which for some women can be one or two cup sizes different."

If you're lucky enough to find your 'perfect bra' don't forget that it might not be suitable for all occasions. Breasts change during the month, and even during the day. Hormones can make breast size fluctuate during the monthly cycle, up to one to two cup sizes. What you need from your bra also changes at different times.

"Consider wearing different bras for different activities, as support level, strap configuration, adjustability, and style requirements are likely to change between activities," explains Sanchez. "Invest in a well-fitting bra if you are experiencing discomfort or embarrassment associated with your breasts, even if it's only worn at certain times of the month or for specific activities."

It's a good idea to have a supportive sports bra for exercise but generally you should avoid wearing restrictive sports bras all day every day as they can become uncomfortable with prolonged use.

It can be difficult to know if a bra works for you until you've tried it out for a few hours. However, you can check if it's fit for purpose by trying it out in the fitting room in the way that you would normally wear it, to make sure that it isn't too tight, gives you support and lets you move in the way you need to.

"Try your top on. Does it look good? Does it feel good? Jump up and down, swing your arms around. Make sure your bra is fit for the purpose you need it for. If it is a sports bra, do some of the things that you would do if you were doing that sport. If you're sitting down in a job all day, sit down on a chair to try it out because our bodies are in a very different position from standing to sitting. Try it out as you would wear it every day," explains Hughes.

"If it's not comfortable, it's definitely not right. If you've got any doubt at all, don't get it."

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Last updated by: Milly Evans 08/10/2019	
Peer reviewed by: Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP 08/10/2019	

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