

Consumer Choices

Clothing ideas for people with special needs

If you or someone you care for has a physical disability, you know that finding clothes that fit well and look good can be a problem. But solutions do exist.

One summer day, a young mother didn't slow down enough for the off ramp. She wasn't wearing a seat belt, and was thrown from her truck as it crashed and rolled over. She did not walk away from the accident. She now uses a wheelchair.

Physical disabilities can be acquired suddenly by accident, be with a person from birth, or come gradually through illness or disease. They can happen to anyone.

No matter when or how they start, physical disabilities affect daily living decisions—especially those about clothes. Physical disabilities often make it hard to get dressed and undressed, but clothing challenges seldom are the same for any two individuals.

Some special clothing needs come with normal aging. For example, some people over 40 years old may need bifocal eyeglasses, have increased skin problems, or experience gradual diminished ease of physical movement. You may think of yourself only as “slowing down” and not as a person with a disability or a special need. Nevertheless, some of these functional clothing ideas can prove helpful.

This publication offers some clothing ideas to help you find clothes to suit your special needs. You *can* select clothing that:

- looks good,
- fits well,
- feels comfortable,
- helps you be more independent,
- emphasizes what you want to emphasize,
- conceals what you want to conceal, and
- helps you safely adapt to daily living.

Clothing communicates

You may be thinking, why is clothing so important? Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication. Just as a magazine picture

tells a story, clothing tells something about the person wearing it. What do you want to tell others about yourself? How do you want to appear to others?

Whether intended or not, clothes help “make an impression” on others. But, you are in control of the impression you make, because you can make your own clothing choices. One researcher found that unfashionable clothing had a negative influence on impressions of mental competence for women with disabilities as compared to men with disabilities. So clothing is important because it has a powerful communication effect.

As the nearest “environment,” clothing affects a person’s physical, psychological, and social comfort. A warm winter coat, for example, provides physical comfort. Fabric texture (soft, slippery, or rough), weight, bulkiness, and stretch all contribute to physical comfort. Garment construction and fit also affect physical comfort. Clothing should not restrict movement or be so tight that it pulls.

Psychological comfort comes when you have a sense of well-being because you are confident that your appearance is as good as you can make it.

Clothing contributes to social comfort when it helps you feel as if you “fit in” with others in a group so that you can interact easily. Clothing can signify your membership in a special organization or group. For example, a monogrammed bowling shirt can show that you belong to a team. Uniforms have both a social and communication function.

Regardless of any disability you may have, you can choose from a variety of clothing styles and fabrics that contribute to physical, psychological, and social comfort.

Table 1. Features to consider when choosing clothes

For attractive appearance, consider:

- colors, styles, and designs to express your personality
- cheerful colors and patterns to lift the spirits
- that strongly contrasting patterns and bright colors emphasize the parts of the body they cover; use them to accent your best features
- bright accent scarves to fill open necklines
- necklaces that are long enough to put over the head without fastening, or have larger “lobster-claw” fasteners
- if possible, dressing in daytime clothes rather than robes and bedtime clothes
- structural lines in clothes to direct attention to your best features
- vertical lines to draw attention up to your face or down to your feet
- horizontal lines to draw attention across the body; they are more beneficial at the shoulder than at the seat
- a yoke design that allows fullness below and over the chest or shoulders
- blouson bodice styles; they have adequate length to accommodate back curvature
- boxy jackets to help conceal waistlines and hip irregularities
- bulky knits that may add visual weight, but can conceal items such as ostomy pouches
- for people who use wheelchairs, short jackets that don’t bunch up at the waist; they look neater
- for people who are blind or have limited vision, unique buttons or thread marks sewn inside hems of garments to be worn together; they help match up outfits by touch
- that knit garments sized too small have to stretch too much to fit, and tend to emphasize your weight

For function and ease of dressing, consider:

- clothes with easy-to-manage fasteners and closures; Velcro fasteners, big buttons and buttonholes, and large zipper pulls help you dress yourself
- shoes that fasten with Velcro fasteners
- large or expandable neck openings
- front-opening garments that are easier to get on and off
- ease or fullness in the shoulder area
- jackets or tops with action pleats in sleeves or back; they give more room for shoulder action when pushing wheelchairs or using braces
- larger armholes and sleeves
- pull-on knit sleeve cuffs or cuff buttons re-sewn with elastic thread so they pull on
- easily accessible, large front pockets to carry personal items
- wrap skirt or gown styles that open in back; they can be arranged to stay dry when an incontinent person needs changing
- drop-front slacks for men to make changing ostomy pouches easier
- pants with fullness or pleats to fit over ostomy pouches and legs wide enough to pull over appliances or braces
- for people who use wheelchairs, short or 3/4 length sleeves to avoid sleeves getting soiled by or caught in the wheels
- for people who use wheelchairs, extended back-rise pants to avoid gaps at the waist from pants pulling down
- for people who are blind or have limited vision, closet and clothing storage organization that keeps outfits easy to assemble; closet or drawer dividers may help
- that heavy-weight fabrics provide warmth, but may weigh too much for comfort and may limit movement

Table 1. Features to consider when choosing clothes (continued)

For physical comfort, consider:

- two piece outfits to improve fit; the top and bottom can be different sizes
- shirts, blouses, and jackets that are over-sized or have kimono or raglan sleeves or back pleats to allow for shoulder movement
- loose or adjustable waistlines; elastic allows for expansion, but if too tight can cut circulation
- one-piece body shirts or long shirttails that will stay tucked into pants or skirts
- to keep warm, layering fabrics or choosing quilted fabrics with polyester fiberfill or down
- to keep cool, light-weight, absorbent fabrics that “breathe” to let body perspiration escape
- cotton or cotton blend fabrics that “breathe”
- soft fabrics that don’t irritate or rub the skin, such as sweatshirt fleece
- knit fabrics that stretch and stay neat during wear; rib knits stretch most and often are used in necklines and cuffs
- ample seam allowances should alteration be needed

For convenience and care, consider:

- printed fabrics; they show soiling less readily than solid colors
- uneven-textured fabrics; they show soiling less readily than smooth-textured fabrics
- mealtime cover-ups (aprons or over-sized bibs) to prevent food stains on good clothing
- nylon tricot and polyester knits found in undergarments; they are strong and quick drying, but may wrinkle in laundry at high temperatures
- durable and washable fibers such as cotton, nylon, polyester, and acrylic or their blends; they are found in many different fabric weights and textures

- if laundering is done commercially, fabrics that are durable enough to withstand high washing and drying temperatures
- fabrics that don’t need ironing such as knits or durable press cotton/polyester blends
- disposable incontinence products; they may save time, but often cost more than reusables
- reusable incontinence products; but they may be difficult to manage when you are away from home
- suede shoes that don’t need polishing

For safety, consider:

- sturdy, supportive, non-slip shoes or slippers
- garments that fit closely to the body; they are less likely to get caught in wheelchairs or other equipment, and less likely to be a fire hazard near candles, fireplaces, heaters, and stoves
- garment lengths that prevent entanglement in wheelchairs, braces, or other appliances
- flame resistant fabrics, particularly for individuals who smoke or have limited mobility
- layered clothing for cold weather protection; try bulky, insulative layers under closely woven barrier fabrics that repel rain and wind
- that elastic stockings or supports may be prescribed; but tight, narrow bands at cuffs, waist and ankles may cut circulation and usually should be avoided

NEVER allow a wheelchair user to smoke unsupervised in a chair with an attached oxygen tank. Burn injury and death can occur if clothing catches fire from a cigarette spark.

Finding the clothes you need

If you decide you need additional or new clothes, you may face challenges in shopping. When a mall or shopping area is accessible, you may have to look for an elevator to get from one floor to another. Often the hallways and doors into dressing rooms are too narrow for wheelchairs. However, some department stores have large changing rooms in their bridal departments that are large enough for wheelchairs. Don't be afraid to ask to use them. Also, if the merchandise is hung up where you can't reach it, don't be shy about asking a sales associate for help.

If you can't go to a store, call the store of your choice to ask if personal shopping service is available. If so, you can talk to a sales associate who will select merchandise for you, charge it to your credit card, and send it to your home for your approval. You can return items that you don't like or that fit poorly.

Catalog, Internet, or television shopping are ways to shop for clothes and other helpful items at home. Most catalog and Internet companies offer instructions for measuring your body to determine clothing size to order. Most also allow returns if the items ordered do not fit, or are not as anticipated. Often you also can find accessories, useful aids, and equipment such as canes to assist your mobility, from these sources. Television shopping is a bit riskier, as the items are often offered for view for a very short time and require a quick buying decision. This limits your opportunity to consider the features presented.

As interactive mass media develop and change, new means of merchandise presentation will make home shopping easier.

Take inventory

Table 1 lists features to consider when making clothing choices. But before you begin thinking about new clothes, it's a good idea to take inventory of the clothes you have. Ask yourself these questions:

- Which clothes do you like the best?
- What features make them your favorites?
- Do you have clothes that could be more comfortable or functional with alteration?
- If alteration will help, can you do it yourself? Or, do you know someone else who can do it for you?

After you have listed the clothes you like most, think carefully about why they are your favorites. It may be a cheerful color, a fabric that doesn't wrinkle or show soil, or a way the garment is cut so that it fits more comfortably without restricting your movement. Whatever the features are, these ideas should be at the top of your list of features to look for when you get new clothes.

Fashion is always changing, but sometimes "functional" designs such as front opening styles or "raglan" sleeves are the "new fashion trend." If these styles fit you well, get them when they are available, because next year they may not be obtained so easily.

If you like to wear the same clothes a long time, select classic styles in basic colors because they will not look outdated as quickly. If you need to have clothing altered to fit, it's usually easier to do so with classic styles that have fewer design lines.

Although few individuals with disabilities have exactly the same needs, there are common concerns that many share. Most people with physical disabilities want clothing that is attractive in appearance, comfortable, functional and easy to manage, safe, and easy to care for.

As you begin to think carefully about your own special clothing needs and how they can be addressed, you may discover ideas that will help you dress and undress more easily. Also, you may find ideas that will help improve your appearance so that you feel more physically, psychologically, and socially comfortable. By making informed consumer choices and using clothing skillfully, you can communicate your best to those around you.

For more information

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... and justice for all

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