



BY MARY TIMMER

# Better fit for better health

In an age when television commercials and bigger-than-life posters and billboards advertise the latest innovations in bras, it is hard to believe that most women have never had a bra fitting.

Fit experts estimate that nearly 85 percent of women are wearing the wrong size bra. Experts also agree that proper bra fit and good health go together.

**PROPER FIT IS IMPORTANT** to muscular and skeletal health, especially for larger-breasted women, said Robyn Hubbard, an OB/GYN doctor at West Michigan Women's Health Center. "Tight-fitting bras can cause lymph and circulation issues, as well."

Hubbard has seen the consequences of ill-fitting bras, such as shoulder and rib cage scars, deep divots in the skin, and back and shoulder strain.

In the Grand Rapids area, women have a number of resources to help them find a well-fitting bra. Some department stores offer bra-fitting services, but many women need more specialized help.

"The wrong size bra is going to result in back problems," said Debra Bates of MeMe's Foundations, 7199 Thornapple River Drive, Ada.

Bates begins a fitting by determining the proper band size for her clients because most support from the bra should come from the band. Since most department stores only carry cup sizes up to DD, "we've seen women come in wearing a 44DD who may actually need a 38F."

She said many women don't know what to look for. "They think they need an underwire when they don't have to have one. Some women should have both underwire and non-underwire bras."

Muriel Robinson, owner of Muriel's Intimate Apparel, 32 E. 8th St., Holland, has had a faithful following of clients for 11 years. She believes that women feel better in the right bra and that good posture can depend on it.

"You can't believe the difference the right fit makes," said Robinson. "After I've put them in the right bra, I've had women say, 'Look at me. I'm standing straighter.'"

Robinson went on to describe the way a bra should fit. "You want the front and back of the band to be even around the torso. And you should be able to fit your



*Muriel Robinson, owner of Muriel's Intimate Apparel, takes a customer's measurements to help her find the perfect-fitting bra.*

thumb between your shoulder and the strap. You never want an underwire to rest against the breast tissue, and you never want to have the cup 'cutting in' on the breast. If you get the right fit, you should barely notice it's there."

In Grandville, Jeunique Custom-Fitted Bras and Body Fashions offers custom-fit bras for women size 28 to 46 with a wide selection of cup sizes, including specialized bras for nursing and mastectomies. With a design based on the engineering of the Golden Gate Bridge, Jeunique's bras rely on the bra band rather than the shoulder straps to give support.

"Our bras support with a band beneath the breasts, which takes weight off the shoulder," said Brenda Green, a partner in the direct-selling business. "It helps you stand up straighter, takes pressure off the lower back and brings the bust up."

"It's very difficult for large-breasted women to find a proper fit," Green add-

ed. "I have clients with scarring from the stays in their bras." Green can be reached at 777-0513.

Baby Beloved, located in the Women's Health Center on Michigan Street in Grand Rapids, carries nursing bras up to size 50L.

"Pregnancy and nursing are the most important time for women to have a bra fitting because their breasts are going through so many changes," said Kelly Emery, R.N., lactation consultant and owner of the business. "They need good support because of the added weight, and an ill-fitting bra can cause plugged ducts."

She encourages expectant mothers to get fitted around 36-38 weeks into their pregnancy and again four weeks after their baby is born.

Emery also sees non-nursing women. She believes that a well-fitted bra can help diminish some of the effects of grav-

ity and time. "Without enough support, the ligaments that support the breast can stretch, and stretch marks are more likely."

The Shoppe in Saint Mary's Lacks Cancer Center helps fit women who have undergone a mastectomy. In a private boutique setting, Dottie Wiersma, a registered nurse and breast care specialist, helps patients and long-term clients find prosthetics and bras that protect their health in addition to restoring their pre-surgery appearance.

Proper bra fit and prosthetic choice are critical in mastectomy cases, Wiersma said. "Many women are quite self-effacing and say, 'It's just a breast. I can just stuff a tissue in my bra and keep going.' But the weight of a prosthesis balances the weight of their other breast and keeps the shoulders even and the spine straight. If you don't have a prosthesis, that shoulder (on the side of the mastectomy) is eventually going to rise."

Prosthetics are available for both mastectomies and lumpectomies that cause uneven weight and size in one breast. With a properly fitted bra and the right prosthetic, Wiersma assures her clients that even a hug won't cause them embarrassment or discomfort.

"It really is amazing," she said of her customer's reactions. "When they look normal again, some women break down in tears. They want to say, 'It's just a breast,' but it's such a big part of our femininity."

Websites offer bra fitting techniques, but many women find it best to work with a certified fitter who can put them into the right style of bra for their needs.

"We have ladies who come to the shop who've never had a mastectomy," said Wiersma. "They come for the fit." **GRF**

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