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Finding a Good Fit for the Female Form

We Size Up Stores That Help Women Buy the Perfect Bra

By JANE HODGES

Many women worry more about their outerwear than their underwear. That's too bad, because more than two-thirds of American women wear ill-fitting bras that are uncomfortable, unsupportive and unflattering, say

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many in the undergarment industry.

Could we be among them? To find out, we sought assistance from lingerie departments in Macy's and Nordstrom and at lingerie chain Victoria's Secret. Many retailers offer special bra-fitting events, where an expert fitter provides guidance and measurements, but we sought help from rank-and-file staff to see how day-to-day service stacked up.

We learned that there's a fair amount of variation among bra-fitting methodologies—and bra-sizing methodologies—available at retail stores free of charge. Elisabeth Squires, a Seattle-based author of a breast-health and bra guide, says this is typical.

Doing the Math

Bra fittings have customarily comprised two measurements: One across the breasts and another below the rib cage. However, she says, different sales personnel and manufacturers use different calculations with these two measurements to arrive at a woman's bra size.

This means a salesperson's assessment method and size determination may not apply to all brands. Add to this discrepancy the fact that bra styles (underwire, padded and so on) and small weight fluctuations affect bra size, and it's



Michael Sloan

clear that, ultimately, women need to try plenty of bras to arrive at a fit.

"Most really good fitters will tell you this is an art, not a science," Ms. Squires says.

In our experience, the measuring process varied from store to store. All took the traditional measurements—across the breasts and across the rib cage—but each in a different manner. The Nordstrom saleswoman had us disrobe in a dressing room and don a "fitting bra" before measuring us unclothed. A Macy's saleswoman took us in a dressing room and measured us over our clothes (a sheer top), as did a Victoria's Secret saleswoman, though the latter had us stand outside the dressing rooms for an over-the-clothes measurement session.

Getting a Second Opinion

At Nordstrom, we were impressed that our assistant sought a second opinion from a colleague, who told us our size was pegged properly. She also gave us some bra-fitting

tips for solo bra shopping in the future: The band encircling our rib cage provides 90% of a bra's support, she said, adding that many women mistakenly think the bra's support comes from shoulder straps, and they thus pull the straps unnecessarily tight. She brought us five bras, priced

'Most really good fitters will tell you this is an art, not a science' says one expert.

from \$38 to \$58. Two of those bras fit. She also offered additional models.

At all three stores, sales staff told us we needed a bigger band size, and were able to identify appropriately fitting brassieres for us in a larger size. The Nordstrom and Macy's saleswomen both said a larger cup size might be in order, too, depending on the brand or cut of brassiere in

question. At Macy's, we were offered six bras ranging in price from \$28 to \$58, but some cups and styles seemed designed for a person with significantly larger breasts and were a bit too bulky in their support and too matronly for us.

Presentation Helps

At Victoria's Secret, much of the merchandise was too skimpy or appeared designed for a younger or thinner customer. However, the store's "Ipex" bras, available in two styles and priced at \$48, fit us perfectly. We appreciated that at Victoria's Secret, bras are organized by size in drawers rather than hung on racks; this allowed us to swiftly locate appropriate bras without flipping through lots of hangers.

All in all, we were glad we asked for professional bra-fitting help rather than going it alone. We were surprised to learn that we were wearing the wrong band size. Had we gone shopping unassisted, we might have bought the wrong size yet again.

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STORE	FITTING TECHNIQUE	SIZE CHANGE	PRICE	COMMENT
Nordstrom Bellevue Square, Bellevue, Wash.	Two tape measurements while wearing a "fitting bra" in a dressing room, with measurements double-checked by a second saleswoman.	Increased one size in the band and one size in the cup (from 36D to 38DD)	\$38 to \$58, five bras from three brands proposed	We were impressed that we got fitted twice; the variety and type of bras brought to the dressing room appealed.
Macy's Westfield Southcenter Mall, Tukwila, Wash.	Two tape measurements, over clothes, in a dressing room.	Increased one size in the band; cup size increased with one but not all styles (from 36D to 38DD)	\$28 to \$58, six bras from three brands proposed	The saleswoman helped us find the bra type we wanted—a smooth cup, no underwire—but some bra styles were matronly or had too-large cups. Shopping during a "one-day sale" meant we had to wait 10 minutes for a free fitter.
Victoria's Secret Westfield Southcenter Mall, Tukwila, Wash.	Two tape measurements, over clothes, outside dressing room.	Increased one size in the band (from 36D to 38D)	\$48, two variations of one bra proposed (Victoria's Secret brand only)	The store appeals to younger shoppers, but "Ipex" bras proposed by our saleswoman fit. Bras are kept in drawers rather than on hangers, making shopping easier than in other stores.



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