



Dressing with Ease, Style and Comfort

Dressing and undressing are often challenging task among people with limited mobility. While buttons and zippers are frustrating for some folks, others may find reaching arms through armholes of putting legs through leg holes tedious chores. Besides the obstacles people face for dressing independently, it is not always easy for their assistants. Wearing accessible clothes and selecting attire to meet individual needs will make dressing easier, sparing unnecessary aggravation and fatigue.

Getting dressed everyday, even if not leaving the house, is really important for boosting self-esteem. In general, clothing should not restrict joint motion. Light-weight or stretch-knit fabrics allow greater freedom of movement. Roomy armholes and garments which open in the front, eliminating the need to raise arms over head are easier to put on and take off. Large buttons, which require little finger/hand coordination can replace standard fasteners, and be hidden in shirts, blouses, dresses and pants. Zippered fronts on tops and dresses also offer convenience. Buttons sewn on with elastic thread are easier to manage.

Sewing fabric loops inside pants and underwear makes pulling them on and off much simpler. Trousers with elastic waistbands or drawstrings and French-cut underpants with wide leg openings, like boxer shorts, make dressing and toileting easier. Leg brace wearers should choose knit pants loose enough to pull on easily over braces. Wraparound skirts go on better than skirts which fasten in the back, and accommodate weight changes. Wearing a wraparound skirt with the opening in the back, as well as drop-seat pants, are ideal for using the toilet when traveling. By wearing culottes, ladies can enjoy the look of a skirt and the convenience of pants. Pulling a slip over the head can be avoided by wearing a half slip. Front-fastening bras or all-stretch bras permit more independence in dressing.

Some people find dressing safer and easier while lying down, especially when pulling up pants. Others prefer to sit on the edge of the bed or chair. Those who have one side weaker than the other should dress the weaker side first. Dressing aids are available to help persons put on and take off garments. Some devices include a dressing stick with a hook on the end to assist in pulling up pants without bending over; a buttoner to pull buttons through button holes; a zipper pull to open and close zippers; a stocking aid to pull on stockings; long wooden scissors for reaching clothing; a long-handled shoehorn to help get shoes on.

What to wear on the feet depends on one's ability to walk. Persons with weak ankles and feet may warrant an evaluation by an occupational or physical therapist. Lightweight, supportive shoes may be recommended for walking, and possibly brae support too. Some persons prefer moccasins, as rubber-soled shoes may cause tripping, although they help keep the feet from slipping off wheelchair footplates. To put laced shoes on and off with ease and without having to retie them, replace standard shoelaces with elastic laces. Other kinds of easy access shoes are shoes with Velcro fasteners across the top, or loafers. For added convenience, women can wear thigh-high hosiery or knee socks with skirts, instead of pantyhose. Wearing knee-high fashion boots or calf high leg warmers are ideal for hiding leg braces on skirt wearers.

Persons who sit a lot should choose clothes that not only feels comfortable, but looks attractive while sitting. Wearing a flexible fabric, such as a soft cotton/polyester blend, moves with the body, providing



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the most comfort. Wearing loose tops that are worn on the outside of pants and skirts look and feel the best. Wheelchair users find short jackets, ponchos or capes more convenient than long coats. Men who wear suits may need to alter their suits, adding extra room in the shoulders and the seat. The use of clip-on ties or ready-tied ties with a Velcro fastener may spare the hassle of tie tying.

Dresses and skirts that are cut fuller in the hips prevent riding up when sitting. Although outfits with fullness are comfortable, excess fullness in sleeves, pant legs, and skirts can get caught in wheelchair spokes, and can also cause tripping. Sitter should avoid wearing pants with heavy seams that may cause pressure areas when sitting.

Whether a fabric is comfortable depends on how it feels, how much heat it retains, and how well it absorbs moisture. Because immobility and loss of subcutaneous fat can cause some persons to feel cold, wearing several layers of light clothing can trap in heat and is more effective in keeping warm than using heavy clothes. The wearer can remove layers when feeling overly warm. Light clothing made of terrycloth or cotton flannelette fabric may be more comfortable.

In addition to accessibility and comfort, color, and texture should be key factors in clothing choices. Colorful tops add brilliance to basic slacks and skirts. Fleecewear is both functional and fashionable, and is easy to wear anytime, anywhere. Those who like denims will find stonewashed cotton the softest. Slippery fabrics, such as those used in nylon lingerie, allow the body to slide easily from one surface to another, like from bed to chair. Wearing nylon pajamas or gowns will help the wearer turn over in bed. Persons with breathing problems may breathe better with wide open necklines, and should avoid hairy fabrics, like mohair, as floating filaments may be inhaled.

Dressing for success means wearing clothes that are easy to wear, good-looking, and comfortable day and night. Finding solutions to dressing problems will take the stress out of dressing. And feeling your best begins by looking your best.

— Excerpted from an article written by Pamela A. Cazzolli, R.N., Nurse Consultant, Eastern Ohio Chapter, Rev. 6/96.

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