Lifestyle

Clothing and fashion for wheelchair users

Clothes can be fashionable, functional, comfortable and smart. They are often an expression of personality. People like to look and feel good in what they wear.

However most clothing is designed to enhance the appearance of the wearer when standing upright. When seated, people have a different body shape, with the hips and knees bent. Standard skirts and trousers can gap at the back and bunch at the front of the waist.

Over a period of time, the body shape and proportions of someone who sits all the time can change. The waist may thicken and hips and thighs broaden. Many disabled people have great difficulty finding clothes, which not only fit them properly but are also in fashion.

For people with neuromuscular conditions there may be the additional problems of postural deformities developing, and progressive loss of function and mobility.

Clothes for wheelchair users - what to look for:

Style and comfort

Outerwear

- Coats and jackets should be short at the back so they are not sat upon.
- It is difficult for a seated person to put on, or cope with, a full-length coat. Casual jackets, anoraks or sleeveless bodywarmers which finish just below the waist are easier.
- Blouson-style jackets which finish just below the waist are flattering for a wheelchair user.
- Jackets designed for wheelchair users are usually short at the back and longer in the front.
- People who use wheelchairs may find a hip length jacket more suitable, with slits in the side seams at waist level to avoid strain over the hips.
- Double-ended zips can be opened to the waist to prevent the zip from curling up.
- Short capes, shawls, and ponchos are useful as they can be slipped on easily
- Raglan sleeves or dropped shoulders give big armholes.
- People who are susceptible to the cold need to conserve body heat. Coats and jackets should be lightweight, perhaps padded or quilted, and as windproof as possible to avoid wind chill. Satin type linings enable garments to be slipped on easily.
- Rain capes, fabric capes and coveralls are available from specialist suppliers.

Skirts

- Loose fitting styles are usually more comfortable to wear.
- Flared, softly pleated or gored skirts flatter the seated wearer.
- ‘A’ line skirts can give the appearance of a straight skirt without the fabric pulling across the hips.
- The length of clothing is a matter of personal preference. However, when seated, the tighter a garment the shorter it looks. A short skirt finishing above the knee may make the knees appear very prominent. This skirt length is most flattering when worn with colour co-ordinated stockings, tights or leggings. Longer skirts which fall over the knees are more attractive.
- Culottes or divided skirts have many of the advantages of trousers while giving the appearance of a skirt.

- A button-front, kilted or wrap-round skirt can be laid on the wheelchair before sitting in it which can make dressing easier. It can also be unfastened and left in the chair when transferring to the toilet.

Dresses

- A dress with a defined waist can be very attractive. However belts and fitted waists can be quite uncomfortable to wear. Softly gathered styles are more suitable.
- Elastic waisted dresses tend to ride up under the arms.
- Styles with front or no fastenings are easiest to put on.
- Co-ordinated separates can make an outfit look like a dress.
- Separates are useful for figures which are disproportionate.
- When wearing separates, tops with shorter backs which just reach the seat are likely to be most comfortable.
- Separates can add greater variety to a wardrobe. In many stores, matching jackets, trousers or skirts can be bought individually.

Blouses, shirts and jumpers

- As with jackets, blouses, shirts and jumpers should have large armholes and sufficient fullness across the back, shoulders and upper arms.
- Shirts and blouses with gathers, pleats or tucks into the back yoke or dropped or raglan seams allow fullness in the upper arms.
- Any top with side slits from hem to waist will lie neatly over the waist and hips.
- Knitted jumpers, sweaters or sweatshirt tops made from jersey fabrics are stretchy and ‘give’ when the wearer moves.

Trousers

- Stretch or elastic waistbands are comfortable, make dressing easier. They will also give fit and comfort and grip tucked in shirts and blouses.
- A deep trouser body avoids ‘gapping’ between trousers and tops.
- Accessible front pockets are more suitable. Avoid pockets at the back or sides.
- All trousers ride up when the wearer is seated. Longer leg length will enable ankles to remain covered.
- Styles with soft pleats in the front allow a looser fit around the buttocks and thighs and are more comfortable. Avoid choosing trousers which are plain cut with rigid waistband.
- Avoid trousers with thick or hard seams.
- Trousers designed for people in wheelchairs are shaped for a sitting posture, with a long back and a short front seam.
- A longer zip opens further down and makes dressing and toileting easier.

Leisure wear

- Jogging outfits and leisure suits are easy to wear, attractive, warm and are suitable for many occasions.
- Many have elasticated waists and those without fastenings are stretchy and easy to put on and take off. Some have zips at the ankle or ‘poppers’ up the side of the leg which may help to accommodate callipers. They are an easy option for people in wheelchairs but can be limiting if worn all the time.

Underwear - women

- Pants should always fit comfortably. Avoid tightness at the waist and groin.
- Some people may find pants which can be manipulated rather than removed easier for toileting.
- If pulling pants up and down is a problem consider wide legged French knickers (leg width of 15inches or more). The knicker leg may be wide enough to pull the crotch easily to one side to use either the toilet or a urinal.
- ‘Teddies’ or ‘bodies’ with fastenings at the gusset are useful.

- Open crotch knickers eliminate the need to pull pants up and down or struggle with crotch fastenings. Wheelchair users who transfer to the toilet by hoist may find open crotch knickers the most appropriate style of underwear.
- Open crotch tights do not need to be pulled up and down when using the toilet or a urinal.

Underwear - men
- Boxer shorts or slips may be more convenient than Y- fronts.
- Soft cotton or jersey fabrics may be the most comfortable to wear.

Fabric
Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of different types of fabrics is important.

- Easy care fabrics dry quickly, retain a good appearance and need little ironing.
- Stretch fabrics are comfortable to sit in and make dressing easier.
- Closely-woven fabrics made from blends of natural and synthetic fibres are strong, keep their shape and resist creasing.
- Smooth slippery fabrics are easier to get on and off.
- Most man made fibres are warm.

Colour
- Clothes of different shades of the same colour help give an impression of height.
- Lighter, patterned shades worn on the upper half of the body with dark, plain coloured trousers or skirts can help maintain a balanced visual image.
- Light coloured trousers or skirts may draw unnecessary attention to the thighs and knees.

Shopping
- Buying clothes can be a pleasure or a nightmare.
- It is a good idea to telephone shops beforehand to see if particular styles and sizes are available and what is the best time to visit.
- Ask about accessibility of the shop and the clothes racks, the size of the changing rooms and whether a person of the opposite sex can accompany you.
- Check the stores' refund and exchange policy.
- Ask if assistants are available to help.
- Mail order shopping is a useful alternative. Goods can be ordered at leisure and tried on at home. They can always be returned if unsuitable and any money paid will be refunded. Often goods do not have to be paid for until accepted.
- Internet shopping is becoming an increasingly popular alternative.

Useful publications for further information

Disabled Living Foundation
Clothing and Footwear Advisory Service
380/384 Harrow Road
LondonW9 2HU
Tel: **020 7289 6111**
Web: **www.dlf.org.uk**
Email: **info@dlf.org.uk**

DLF Fact Sheets (all published 2003, and available via the DLF website)

- Clothing ideas for wheelchair users *.

- Specialist clothing services *.
- Dressing for warmth.
- Choosing a bra.
- Clothing & footwear for people with sensitive skin.
- Clothing for continence and incontinence.
- Clothing ideas for people who rip clothing.
- Equipment to assist with dressing and putting on footwear.
- Finding suitable footwear.
- Footwear adaptations for difficult feet.
- Footwear for cold feet.
- Footwear for odd-sized feet.
- Footwear for swollen feet.
- People with sensitive feet – hints on footwear, socks, stocking & tights.

* These 2 fact sheets in particular contain useful contact details for organisations.

DLF Hamilton Index
(Lists clothing and footwear, in various categories)
- Clothing (Section 17)
- Footwear (Section 18

Fashion for disabled people
Thornton, N.
Batsford, 1990. ISBN 0-7134-6129-2
(Out of print but can be ordered from a library)

Mail order companies specialising in clothes for wheelchair users
(Including people using moulded wheelchair seats and people with scoliosis)

Rolli-Moden
A wide range of clothing designed for wheelchair users – includes casual and formal garments, underwear and footwear. Adult sizes only, with option of alterations and made to measure garments. Catalogue available

Tel: **0049 6226 960 200** (English spoken)
Fax: **0049 6226 960 050**
Email: **export@rollicompany.de**
Web: **www.rollicompany.de**

Able2Wear Ltd
Clothing designed for wheelchair users; cut to fit properly when user is sitting down all day. Trousers, skirts, tops, waterproof and protective garments. Mostly for adults, but some items for children. Catalogue available.

Able2Wear Ltd
53 Donaldson Street
Kirkintilloch
East Dunbartonshire G66 1XG
Tel: **0141 775 3738**
Email: **info@able2wear.com**
Web: **www.able2wear.com**

Bassetlaw Fashion Services
Bespoke clothing and alteration service for disabled people, at high street prices.

Tel**: 01777 860206**
Email: wearabilitybfsdp@fsmail.net
Web**: www.bassettlawfashionservices.org.uk**

Clothing Solutions for Disabled People
Offers purchasing advice, a bespoke design service and tailoring of existing clothes for disabled people.

Tel: **01274 746739**
Email: **enquiries@clothingsolutions.org.uk**
Web: **www.clothingsolutions.org.uk**

Dressability
Local charity offering alterations and a dressmaking service for disabled children and adults. Home visits in Swindon available.

Tel**: 01793 485374**
Web**: communigate.co.uk/wilts/dressability**

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