

Clothing, body image and osteoporosis

Body image, or the way we perceive our physical appearance, is very important for all of us. It affects how we feel about ourselves and appear to others. Finding clothes that are both comfortable and stylish can be a challenge if you've had spinal fractures. This is because of the height loss, curved spine and widening around the tummy that these fractures can sometimes cause.

This fact sheet aims to give practical suggestions for finding clothes to suit a changing body shape. It also includes some useful clothing tips from members of the charity. This information won't be relevant for everyone with osteoporosis, or for people who've only had one or two spinal fractures and whose body shape hasn't been affected.

Who is this fact sheet for?

This information is suitable for both men and women. It may be helpful if you (or someone close to you):

- have had multiple compression fractures in the spine
- have noticed changes in your body shape that mean clothes no longer fit as well as they used to.

It includes the following information:

- How do spinal fractures affect body shape?
- How might spinal fractures affect my body image?
- Common clothing problems
- What to look for when buying clothes
- Bras and underwear
- Adaptive clothing and dressing aids
- Clothing if you've fractured an arm or leg
- Footwear
- Getting more information and support

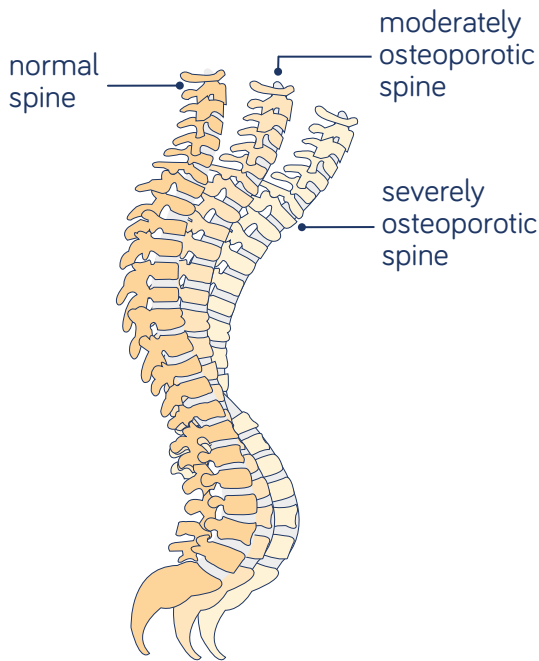
How do spinal fractures affect body shape?

An expanding waistline and protruding stomach do not always mean a person has put on weight. In fact, if you've had spinal fractures, these changes in body shape are probably caused by your spinal fractures.

Spinal fractures caused by osteoporosis are often known as vertebral compression fractures. This is because the bones become squashed or 'compressed' due to their reduced strength.

Spinal bones heal like any other bone, but they do not return to their previous shape. If several bones are affected, you may experience significant height loss and a curved spine (kyphosis). This can leave less space inside your abdomen, pushing your stomach outwards. So, even though you haven't put on weight, your waistline may get bigger.

In this fact sheet, the terms spinal, vertebral, and vertebral compression refer to fractures in the spine caused by having osteoporosis and weak bones.



How might spinal fractures affect my body image?

The way we feel about our bodies can affect all aspects of our daily life. When we wear clothes that fit well and feel comfortable, this inevitably helps to boost our confidence and morale. Feeling unhappy about how your body looks can result in low self-esteem and affects many people, both emotionally and psychologically.

Some people assume that older people aren't as concerned about how they look. But there is, of course, no age limit to having an interest and concern about our appearance.

People who call the charity's Helpline sometimes describe the experience of spinal fractures and changes to their body shape as a type of loss, with women in particular often saying they feel less attractive or less feminine.

Others say they avoid social gatherings because they feel too distressed and self-conscious about the way their body looks and have difficulty finding suitable clothes.

Not everyone with spinal fractures has a negative body image. But it's important to acknowledge the real distress that many people feel. And it's important for them to know they're not alone and there are positive ways to tackle these problems.

Things people have told us about their body image:

'I caught sight of myself in a shop window and was shocked to see how old and bent over I look now.'

'I can't bear to look at myself in the mirror.'

'I don't have the trim figure I used to have and none of my clothes in my wardrobe fit any more.'

'I look 8 months pregnant these days!'

'I don't feel I can go to my granddaughter's wedding because I struggle to find clothes that make me look attractive and hide my curved spine.'

Common clothing problems

If you've had spinal fractures, you may begin to notice that your clothes don't fit as they used to.

Dresses or shirts might poke open at the back of the neck or feel tighter across your back. A shorter chest area could mean your clothes are now too long and your trousers may end up just below your breasts.

The loss of a waistline and a protruding tummy can make skirts and trousers too tight around the waist and your hemlines might become uneven.



What to look for when buying clothes

One of the most important things to remember when choosing and buying clothes is to continue to buy what you like. Clothes are one of the first things people see when they meet you, and they tend to reflect our personality.

For people with significant changes in posture, this is easier said than done and it can be hard to find a suitable outfit. It may sometimes mean having to compromise on style in order to find something that fits and is comfortable.

While there's no perfect way to find clothes to fit a changing body shape, there are a number of things that can help draw the eye away from the main problem areas. The following information aims to give you some ideas for what to look for when buying clothes and includes tips on clothing styles, fabrics and colours.

Clothing styles for women

- **Look for one good-quality outfit.** A two-piece outfit, including a jacket with a skirt or trousers, will usually work better than a dress. You can change the look of the outfit by wearing different coloured tops and accessories.
- **Choose clothes that are loose, tailored, or just slightly fitted.**
- **Think about choosing an empire waist, dropped waist or A-line** if you do want a dress. An asymmetrical design can work well if you struggle with drooping hemlines.
- **Necklines that are rounded, slightly v-shaped or a soft cowl** may be best.
- **Tops with gathers or pleats from the neckline**, shoulder or a high 'yoke' will help to accommodate a curved spine.
- **Raglan, dropped or dolman sleeves** often work well and are easier to move around in.
- **Shoulder pads** can help to create a good shape – you could always add your own.
- **Styles with two or more layers of different material** can help to disguise problem areas.
- **Look for tops with side slits**, which can make them sit better around the waist or on the hips.

- **Colourful accessories can draw attention away from your back and shoulders.** For example, a wrap is both fashionable and useful for hiding your shoulders.
- **Look for clothes that you, or a dressmaker, could alter fairly easily** to accommodate your changing body shape.
- **Try to choose clothes with easy-to-manage fasteners.** For example, back-fastening zips can be a problem for some people.

Additional tips for women from our members

Here are a few more suggestions for clothing styles from members of the Royal Osteoporosis Society.

- A blouson top with a loose band (or smocked hemline), if worn with a skirt made in the same fabric, can look like a dress.
- Adjustable Waist Trousers (from the Damart catalogue) have an adjustable waistband for comfort and a better fit. Visit damart.co.uk or call 0871 200 9000.
- Skirts and trousers with elasticated waistbands are less restrictive and will accommodate a tummy bulge. Damart (see above) and JD Williams clothing companies have a good range of stylish skirts and trousers with elasticated waists. Visit jdwilliams.co.uk or call 0345 071 9018.
- Pinafore dresses can also help to hide bulges and can be worn with both shirts and sweaters.
- Maternity jeans – for example, 'Over the bump' jeans are slim-legged and have a soft, stretchy panel that covers the tummy with an elastic waistband. The panel is easy to hide with a slightly longer top.
- Wrap-around skirts.
- To avoid a tight waistband, unpick the waistband and sew the skirt onto a full-length slip. This also helps the skirt to hang evenly.
- Petite clothing ranges for jackets and tops can sometimes provide a better fit if your chest area has become shorter, as these are designed for women with a height of 5ft 3inches and under.
- Men's trousers may fit better if your waistline has disappeared – in fact, newer styles of trousers and jeans are often worn a few inches below the natural waistline or just at the hip bones.

- Maternity tights or Cosyfeet Softfold hold-ups (stockings), also available in petite length and a warmer, ribbed design, could be an option.
- Cotton jersey nightwear is comfortable and easy to put on.

Clothing styles for men

Finding clothing to suit a changing body shape can be just as challenging for men with spinal fractures as it is for women. For example, if you have a protruding tummy, you may need to wear trousers below your waistline, which could cause them to slip down.

A tummy bulge and a curved spine may mean you need to buy shirts and jackets in a much larger size than before. This could limit your choices. You may also end up paying more for your clothes, particularly if you choose shops that specialise in bigger sizes.

Additional tips for men from our members

Here are a few tips for men from our members.

- Avoid tight clothing – buy clothes that aren't too baggy, but are loose enough to be comfortable.
- You may need to buy trousers that are longer than usual, to ensure the correct waist size. You can then get them altered to make them shorter.
- Braces can be more comfortable than a tight waistband or belt on trousers, and will help keep your trousers in place.
- A jacket, worn undone, can hide an oversized shirt and help to hide your tummy bulge.
- If you need to wear your trousers below your waistline, you may need to wear a longer shirt too.

Finding a suit that fits can be even harder than finding casual wear. This could be a particular problem if you have to dress formally for work or an important event.

Rather than buying a bigger size than usual and then paying to have it altered, you may want to consider having a suit made for you, possibly with extra pairs of trousers to make the outfit last longer.

Colours

People who are self-conscious about their body tend to avoid brightly-coloured clothes. Blacks and greys might feel safer, but wearing some colour could help to draw attention away from the parts of your body that you're uncomfortable with. It might also help to lift your spirits, particularly in the dark winter months.

Here are some tips:

- Consider wearing some colourful accessories, such as a scarf or bracelet, to brighten up your outfit.
- If you've lost some height, wearing a single colour could help to make you look taller.
- Don't be afraid of bold prints or stripes. Vertical stripes (from top to bottom) can make you look taller and help to hide problem areas.
- Dark pin-stripe trousers can be smart and flattering.
- A light pattern on a solid colour can work well and create a softer appearance.

If you're not sure which colours look best on you, you could book an appointment with a colour or image consultant. Consultants hold coloured drapes close to your face to see which ones enhance your skin tone, eyes and hair colour. They then give you a small book of fabrics in the colours that suit you the most.

Fabrics

Natural fabrics such as cotton are usually the most comfortable to wear and, unlike some man-made fabrics, won't reflect light at pressure points. Avoid fabrics that might cling to your body. It's best to wear materials that fall nicely over the middle of your body.

Made-to-measure clothes

Having clothes made for you is the best way to ensure they will fit well and suit your size and style. This may be too expensive to do regularly, but you might want to consider it for a special event, such as a wedding or celebration.

Personal shoppers

If you're shopping for clothes, you may want to think about using a personal shopping service, such as the ones offered by many department stores. This service is often free and you can book a session in advance.

Personal shoppers can help you find an outfit that suits your needs. Make sure you go with an open mind and be willing to try on different shapes, styles and colours until you find what works for you.

Remember, your body shape shouldn't always decide what you do or don't wear – your clothes should be a personal choice.

Getting clothes altered

You can usually find a dressmaker or tailor by looking in your local telephone directory or online. There are

also some specialist organisations that alter clothing for people with a disability or other special needs.

For example:

- clothingsolutions.org.uk – call 01274 292 291
- dressability.org.uk – call 01793 512 878

These can make a variety of alterations to clothes, such as making hemlines level and adjusting waistbands, as well as making clothes.

You, or someone you know, might be able to make some minor alterations to clothes yourself. If you are nervous about this, try practising on an old piece of clothing, or on something cheap from a charity shop.

Bras and underwear

Finding a suitable bra

Many people struggle to find a comfortable bra. Manufacturers have begun to recognise the demand for comfortable underwear that meets particular needs. There are now several suitable styles available. For example, try chums.co.uk (call 03333 554 455).

It's worth paying for a good, supportive bra. A poorly fitting bra can lead to neck, shoulder and back problems, as well as being uncomfortable. Your bra must be able to support the weight of your breasts and should be firm, but not too tight.

If you've had spinal fractures, a suitable bra is particularly important. This is because it will help to maintain your posture and support your weakened spine.

Sizing

If possible, it's a good idea to have your bra size measured professionally. Larger department stores and specialist lingerie shops usually offer this service.

Bra sizes can vary a lot between manufacturers. So even if you think you know your bra or cup size, it's best to try on several different sizes and styles to see what feels most comfortable. You may, for example, need a larger chest size but a smaller cup size to accommodate your shape changes.

Remember that your bra size or body shape may change over time. So it's a good idea to get measured again from time to time, to ensure your chosen bra style still fits you properly.

Styles

It's very common for spinal fractures to affect the middle or 'thoracic' part of the spine – often where your bra strap sits. Some women find a sports-type bra that fastens at the front and has a T-shaped back more comfortable. Others prefer an under-wire bra, as it may be less likely to ride up. However, an under-wire bra is unlikely to be suitable or feel comfortable if you have a very curved spine.

Front-fastening bras are generally easier to put on. Or some bras have magnetic fastenings or poppers, instead of hooks. If you have smaller breasts, a bra slip or a vest with a supportive 'shelf lining' may be an option.

If you do find a really good bra that is comfortable and suits your body shape, you may want to buy a couple extra, as manufacturers often discontinue products after a while.

Made-to-measure bras and alterations

Specialist lingerie shops, such as **Rigby & Peller**, have a made-to-measure bra and alteration service. Having a bra made for you may be too expensive, but these shops will often make alterations to some of their ready-made bras. A back-fastening bra, for example, can be altered so that it opens at the front or the side.

Specialist alteration services can sometimes change the fastenings on bras, for example replacing bra hooks with Velcro to help make dressing easier.

Bra extenders

Bra extenders can be used to give you some extra room at the back of a bra. You can buy these from some lingerie shops, sewing departments, or online.

Be aware that if you make the back of your bra too wide, this could push the straps out towards your shoulders and cause them to slip down your arms. People with narrow shoulders or a curved spine often have problems with bra straps slipping off their shoulders. It may help to fix an inch-wide piece of elastic between the straps, about five to six inches above the back of the bra.

If you have a bra with detachable straps, you could replace them with clear plastic ones. These are non-slip and more likely to stay in place. Or, you could buy a bra strap retainer and sew it into the shoulder seam of a garment.

Taking care of your bras

Bras do tend to wear out and lose their elasticity and support. Many bra fitters suggest that the average bra should only be used for 6 to 12 months, but this will depend on how much you wear it and also how you wash it.

Hand washing a bra in non-biological powder is usually best. But if you prefer to machine wash, place your bra in a pillow case or laundry bag and wash on a low temperature.

Pants, vests and slips

Traditional styles of underwear are often less restrictive and more comfortable to wear. You may need to shop around for these, but they are still sold by specialist lingerie stores and online shops.

Some people like to wear a pair of pants with greater coverage, or a style with a slightly longer leg.

Vests and slips with wide, built-up shoulder straps tend to be better than those with thin ribbon straps, as they won't slip down past your shoulders.

Continence problems

Many people experience some form of urinary incontinence (leaking urine). This tends to affect people as they get older, but it can affect younger people too, especially women. Lots of things can cause it, including the effects of pregnancy, childbirth and menopause on the muscles in the pelvis.

If you have a curved spine, the loss of space in your abdomen can put extra pressure on your bladder and pelvic floor. This could lead to stress incontinence, where urine leaks when you cough or sneeze. If this is a problem for you, do speak to your doctor. They may refer you to a physiotherapist for advice on pelvic floor exercises, or to a specialist nurse or continence advisor who can tell you about different products and clothing to help manage the problem.

You may be able to get some continence aids on the NHS. But you might have to buy other items yourself, particularly if you prefer a different brand to the one supplied. There are specialist companies that supply continence products, including 'ordinary looking' pants or Y-fronts for men which are designed to hold a pad or have a pad built into the gusset. Some styles are also available with a drop-down front for people who have difficulty dressing and undressing.

Adaptive clothing and dressing aids

Adaptive clothing is clothing that is designed for people who have a disability or difficulty dressing. Not everyone with spinal fractures will need specialist clothing, but it may be suitable if you have major changes in your posture. It may also be helpful if other medical problems have affected you physically.

For example, if you use a wheelchair, need help to stand up, or sit down to get dressed, you may find it easier to wear clothes with a side zip or an open back. If you have reduced strength in your hands, look for clothes that you can easily pull on, such as dresses or tops that you can put on over your head. You may also want to choose clothing with easy-to-grab tags on the zips, or Velcro fasteners instead of buttons.

Visit adaptawear.com (or call 0800 051 1931) for ideas.

Dressing aids

There are various dressing aids available. These range from zip pullers and dressing sticks, to devices to help if you have difficulty bending forwards to put on socks or tights.

You can find out more about dressing aids from Living Made Easy at livingmadeeasy.org.uk (or call 0300 999 0004).

Clothing if you've fractured an arm or leg

If you've fractured a bone in one of your arms or legs, it may feel tender and you may have some swelling and limited movement. You may need to have a splint or plaster cast for a time, until the bone has healed. All of these things could limit your choice of clothing.

Your clothes should be stretchy or loose, so that the affected limb can move freely. Look for clothes that are easy to put on and take off. You'll probably find it easier to put the injured arm or leg into the clothing first, and remove it last when you get undressed.

If you've fractured a leg, you might need to unpick the seams of your trousers so that they fit comfortably.

If you've fractured an arm, you may struggle to use buttons and zips. It may help to use Velcro fastenings for a while, or wear loose tops with larger necklines.

Footwear

Our Helpline nurses often speak to people who ask about suitable footwear. There's no specific guidance on this, other than the obvious – that shoes should be comfortable and fit you well.

If you're not very stable on your feet and at risk of falling, the following may help to reduce this risk.

- Wear a light shoe that fits well. Your shoes should be tight enough that they don't move up and down your heel when you walk, and loose enough that your toes don't feel squashed.
- Choose a shoe with a small heel and a good grip on the sole.

If you have problems with your feet, you may need to see a podiatrist (a specialist in foot and nail problems). They can advise you on suitable footwear. They can also make casts to create custom-made orthotics, such as an inner sole to wear inside your shoes if you have flat feet or fallen arches.

If you need surgical footwear or specially adapted shoes, you may be referred to the Orthotics department at your local hospital. For example, a hip

fracture repair can occasionally cause one leg to be longer than the other. If this happens, you may need a shoe lift or raise to help improve your walking.

It's also possible to buy shoes that can be adjusted if your feet often swell up. Look out for online or mail-order companies that sell this type of footwear.

The image below shows some of the features to look for when buying safe and comfortable shoes:



Getting more information and support

We know that some people struggle to accept the changes that fractures have caused to their body shape. We hope the practical tips and ideas in this fact sheet will help with some of these issues. We also hope it will encourage people with fractures to feel more confident about themselves, despite their changed body shape.

For more information about osteoporosis and bone health, including films featuring people sharing their own experiences of living with spinal fractures, please visit our website at theros.org.uk/info

We also have a series of fact sheets and exercise films that can help with issues such as back pain, posture and balance. You can find these on our website at theros.org.uk/exercise

If you need more information or support, talk to your healthcare professional.

You can also call our specialist Helpline nurses with any questions or concerns about bone health, for free, on **0808 800 035**, or email them at nurses@theros.org.uk



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This information is based on the latest evidence and clinical practice. It should not replace advice from your own healthcare professionals.

To give us feedback on this fact sheet, email us at health.info@theros.org.uk

We provide our information free of charge. To make a donation or become a member, visit theros.org.uk or call **01761 473 287**.

To view or order more information about osteoporosis and bone health:

-  theros.org.uk/info
-  **01761 471 771**
-  info@theros.org.uk

To contact our specialist nurses:

-  **0808 800 0035**
-  nurses@theros.org.uk