The Bra Book
8 Easy Steps To Your True Bra Size
Over 70 per cent of women wear the wrong size bra.
I was one of them. Not knowing how the bra sizing system worked, I had been wearing 36 and 38 Bs and Cs in an attempt to get a cup size big enough. I remember being fitted in the correct bra – a 34DD – for the first time at 17. It was as if I had been let into a secret.

There are so many styles and bra sizes out there it can be daunting. But there is no reason why you should not be able to find your correct size or know how a bra should fit. In this fitting guide, we’ll show you how to replace the traditional tape measure with something far more reliable – your existing bra, a mirror and, most important of all, your own judgement – to find your true bra size in just eight easy steps.

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About Kate
As figleaves.com’s head of sizing, Kate spends much of her day fitting women in our dedicated fitting lab as part of her ongoing research into bra sizing. Before joining figleaves.com, Kate spent four years working as a pattern cutter and grader for some of the major bra suppliers to the high street and top designer brands. A fashion design graduate, Kate trained at DeMontfort University, Leicester, which is the only university in the world offering degree courses in lingerie design.
Why we care

Finding the right bra shape and, more importantly, the right size can be a life changing experience.

It’s well known that 70 per cent of women are wearing the wrong bra size. The most common mistake we come across is wearing a bra that is too small in the cup and too loose around the body, for instance a 36B instead of a 34D, or a 40C instead of a 38DD. This not only gives poor support and causes bulging necklines and lumps under fitted tops, but it can also lead to skin irritation and bad posture and sometimes cause the underwire to pinch into delicate breast tissue.

Until you find your correct fitting bra, you can’t imagine how good it looks and feels.

What will it do for you? Work through our fitting clues and you are likely to find out that you are slimmer and have more cleavage than you thought, while if you have a full figure, you’ll achieve a neater silhouette and more defined waist that makes you look lighter. Either way, the aim is to feel and look better, and to find a bra so comfortable that you will almost forget that you are wearing one at all.
Elizabeth, like many women, was wearing a bra that was too big in the band and too small in the cup.

Elizabeth arrived at our fitting studio in a 36C bra which was riding up at the back and offered little support, causing her to hunch forward.

After being fitted, she emerged a taller, more confident 32E. In the correct bra not only are her breasts properly supported, but her torso looks longer and her posture is better – you can really see the difference it makes under her everyday clothes.
Why we want to break with tradition

Forget about the classic measuring system. It works, for some, but it’s far from reliable.

Manufacturers developed the bra sizing system over 70 years ago, and body shapes – and our understanding of them – have changed a great deal since then. Also, it was never intended for larger cup sizes. The classic bra sizing system was designed for cup sizes A to D. We now have cups up to a JJ and the same rules don’t work at both ends of the scale.

You have to be wearing a bra in order to be measured, but you won’t get an accurate measurement if you are wearing the wrong size bra in the first place. If you are wearing a bra that emphasises or reduces the protrusion of your breasts, for example, you will get a different measurement. This is particularly the case for larger cup sizes.
The classic system also ignores the shape of the ribcage. If, for example, you have broad shoulders that taper to a small waist, you might end up with too large a cup size since the cup measurement won’t take your wider ribcage into account, attributing too much volume to the breasts.

*The classic bra sizing system was designed for cup sizes A to D. We now have cups up to a JJ.*

So if the classic measuring system doesn’t work, what’s the alternative? The good news is you don’t need to consult an ‘expert’ or leave the comfort and convenience of your own home to establish your correct size. You are the expert. Follow our simple steps while trying on your favourite bra in front of a mirror and you should get a clear indication of whether the size you are wearing is correct. If not, the figleaves.com Bra Sizing Chart on page 23 will help you to work out your best fit.
What a correct fitting bra looks like

Correct fitting bra (front)

1. Centre front sits flat against the body.
2. Underwire sits flat against the ribcage.
3. Breast tissue is completely encased in underwire.
4. Underwire follows the natural crease of the breast.
5. Cup fits with no bulging or gaping at the top.
Correct fitting bra (back)

6. Straps are parallel or slightly V shaped at the back.
7. Band is level all the way round, without riding up at the back.
8. Underband is nice and snug.
9. Straps do not dig into the shoulders.

Kate’s tip: “When your bra fits correctly and provides the right support, your nipple should be halfway between your shoulder and your elbow.”
The recommended way to put on a bra

**Step one**

Lean in. Adjust the straps to their maximum length (you’ll shorten them later) and slip your arms through.

Lean forward into the cups, hook up the bra at the back if you can (if not, fasten the bra at the front and then turn it around, taking care not to strain the elastics, before leaning in) and put the straps on your shoulders.
Step two

Adjust the bra. To do this slip a hand into the cup and lift the breast while holding the wire in the correct position with the other hand.

Where should it sit? Look at the natural crease of the breast – the wire should fit along the crease where your breast begins while remaining on the ribcage so that it doesn’t pinch the breast tissue.
Step three

The Jiggle: Hold the wires under the breasts, lean forward and gently shake the bra to the left and right. Your breasts will fall into the cup and sit higher when you stand up straight.
Step four

Adjust the straps. Remember that it’s the bra band that provides most of a bra’s support – not the straps. The straps should therefore support the breast lightly without putting too much pressure on the shoulders; otherwise, the back of the bra will ride up and affect your posture.

Drop the strap off your shoulder so that you can reach the adjusters from the side (or ask someone to help you). You only need to do this once, and the strap length will be right every time.
Our eight fitting clues

Ready? Now it’s time to put on your favourite bra, stand in front of the mirror – or; better still, ask a friend to help you – and start looking for clues.

1. **BACK BAND RIDING UP**

Lift up your arms to see if the underband is tight enough. Check that the underwire is still sitting on the body and that the band is not riding up at the back – if it’s riding up, this might mean that your band is too big. It should sit in a straight horizontal line across your back.

If you are still unsure, here’s how to judge: the underband should fit firmly against the body so that it does not slide around or move away from the chest as you go about your daily activities.

*Kate’s tip:* “If you are afraid that wearing your bra band tighter will create a ‘back fat bulge’, try wearing the back band an inch lower than the front. It will sit on the smaller part of your body and create less of a bulge. Wider side wings are more flattering under a fitted top as they create less of a bulge.”

*Back of bra riding up*
Shoulder straps digging in

2. SHOULDER STRAPS DIGGING IN

The underband of a bra provides the majority (80 per cent) of support for the breasts, with the straps providing just 20 per cent. If the bra straps are digging in it could be because the underband is too loose and the straps are doing most of the work to support the bust – so in this case we recommend that you try a smaller band size. Alternatively, you may just need to loosen the straps.

Kate’s tip: “Wearing too big a back band is one of the most common mistakes that we see. Many people confuse the back measurement with breast size, incorrectly thinking, for instance, that a 36 or 38 must be busty. Your dress size can be a helpful guide – if you are a 10 or a 12, for example, you are unlikely to need a 36 bra.”
3. BACK BAND OVERSTRETCHED

Look at your back straps: they should either be parallel to each other, or converge in a slight V-shape at the back. If they are too far apart at the back (an upside down V), it could mean that your bra band is too small and overstretched. It is possible, however, that this is simply the design of the bra, so look for other clues such as the back band digging in uncomfortably.
4. FRONT BAND PULLING DOWN

Have a look at the underwire at the front of the bra. Does it lie just under the breast, or is it being pulled further down your ribcage? If the underwire is being dragged down to where your ribcage is slightly narrower, this is a sign that you are wearing too small a band size.

It is possible that you have not put your bra on correctly – check that the underwire cannot be pulled up any higher.

Kate’s tip: “The underband must not be so tight that it causes discomfort or restricts movement. If this happens it is too tight.”
5. CENTRE FRONT LIFTING AWAY FROM THE BODY

The centre front should lie flat against the body. If it doesn’t, this could be a sign that the cups are too small, causing the breasts to push the centre front away.
6. WIRE DIGGING IN

Look at the sides of the cups – it’s important that the breast is completely encased by the underwire. Is there any underwire digging into the breast tissue? If so, you might well need a larger cup size.

There is also a possibility that the underband is too tight and pulling the wire so tightly against the chest that it becomes distorted and no longer follows the natural crease of your breasts. This in turn can cause the wire to dig into the bottom and side of the breast. If you find the correct underband size to begin with, you can eliminate this as a possibility.

Kate’s tip: “Bra manufacturers use different wires to create different styles of bra. So, if your bra fits well in all the areas outlined in this guide but the wire is still digging in, it could just be the wrong bra for you.”
7. BULGING OVER THE CUP

Does any breast tissue bulge out at the top of the cup? This means the cup is too small.

Kate’s tip: “If you are unsure try a t-shirt on over the top of the bra and walk towards the mirror. The t-shirt will show up any bulges over the top of the cup.”
8. CUPS TOO BAGGY

If there are creases in your cups you might want to try going down a cup size.

If, however, the cup fits snugly everywhere but is gaping where the cup meets the strap, it could be that the bra is finishing too high up the chest for you. Some people are more hollow in this area than others, so square necklines that finish lower down on the chest – as in a balconette, for example – are better.
DIFFERENT SIZED BREASTS

Do you have one breast bigger than the other? This is very common – most women have one breast around half a size bigger than the other; for some, there is more of a difference.

If you have one breast bigger than the other, a non-moulded bra might be the best style for you as it is more adaptable and forgiving than a t-shirt moulded bra.

Kate’s tip: “It’s important to always fit the bigger breast – tighten the other strap slightly to avoid the cup with the smaller breast sagging. And don’t forget that you can always lightly pad the smaller breast.”
The figleaves.com Bra Sizing Chart®

If you have worked through our fitting clues, you should now have a fair idea of whether you need to try a different size of cup or underband – or even both.

It’s important to understand that the band size and the cup size work together. One of the most common misconceptions is that a D cup is always bigger than a C or B cup. In fact, a bra’s cup size is dependent on its band size – so a 32D holds the same volume as a 34C and a 36B.

What does this mean in practice? Well, if, for example, you are currently wearing a 36DD and you want to go down a band size but keep the same cup, you will need a 34E, not a 34DD, to accommodate your breasts.

If, on the other hand, you are wearing the correct band size but wish to try a different cup size, all you need to do is move up or down a letter size.

It is a good idea to establish your correct band size first before moving on to the cups. Be prepared for your true size to surprise you. Even if you think of yourself as ‘busty’, this does not always translate to a bigger band size – the volume of your breast is all in the cup size. For example, people often think that Katie Price’s size is somewhere in the region of a 36DD because 36 is thought to be a large bra size; in fact, she is a 30G. This is almost the same cup size but a smaller band size.
Changes in bra sizes

Confident that your bra fits correctly? Don’t forget that your size is likely to change over time. Here’s when to double check that your bra still fits.

- When you lose or gain weight. If your dress size has changed (and even if it hasn’t), don’t forget about your bra size – it’s even more sensitive to weight fluctuations. If you gain or lose more than 7lbs or so, follow our eight point guide.

- If your body shape changes. Even if your weight remains the same, your proportions can change – if you start a new gym routine, for example.

- During your monthly cycle. It’s possible to gain a whole cup size when you’re menstruating, and you might need a different bra for those days when your breasts are quite tender – you don’t want to squeeze them into a too-small bra.
• When you’re pregnant – and beyond. Your breasts will start to swell in the first weeks of pregnancy and then again when you start to breast-feed. When you stop breastfeeding, they’ll change size yet again.

• As you lose muscle tone and elasticity in your skin – as you age, for example, or when you stop breast-feeding. You might need to try a different style of bra – a half cup, say, instead of a full cup if you have lost muscle tone in the upper half of the bust.

• If you start taking the pill or HRT. Any hormonal medication can have an effect on your bra size. If do you experience a change, it’s likely to be that your breasts are bigger.

Even if none of the above applies to you, we still recommend checking your bra size every 12 months.
Your bra and your lifestyle

To find the right bra, you’ll have to take into account not only your size but also your lifestyle – there are times in your life when your regular bra won’t work for you. Do you really need a special bra for pregnancy, sport, or post-mastectomy? Yes you do – and here’s why.

Maternity

Women are often told to buy their maternity bras in the fourth month of pregnancy; instead, we recommend listening to your body and doing what is most comfortable for you. For example, your breasts might start to feel swollen well before the fourth month, so do be prepared to invest in a few new maternity bras to accommodate your changing shape as your pregnancy progresses. Generally, though, a maternity bra should fit you on the tightest hook when you buy it – you can loosen it, or even buy bra extenders as you grow.

However many bras you need, comfort is always key. Your breast tissue is growing and will be very delicate, so underwired bras are best avoided if they haven’t been specifically designed for pregnant women. (Underwired maternity bras have a flexible wire that is longer than usual – this means that the bra is wider at the sides to avoid the underwire hitting your glands, which can cause mastitis.)
What to look for? Comfortable, wide straps that don’t dig in, as well as a breathable fabric or one with a high cotton content to keep you cool. Don’t be afraid to try a sports bra – they are super-supportive.

**Kate’s tip:** “The drop cup is not the only difference between a maternity and nursing bra. A pre-natal bra is stretchy so that it can grow with you; a feeding bra, on the other hand, is designed to be more supportive, which means less stretch.”

A nursing or feeding bra is so called because it has cups that drop open to allow your baby access for breastfeeding. Best time to buy? In the 36th week of pregnancy. When you buy your nursing bra, it should fit you on the loosest hook – your back size might well get smaller after the birth, so tighten it as you go along. And don’t worry if it looks a little generous in the cups – your breasts will grow as your milk comes in, and nursing bras are designed to cater for this.

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**Post-mastectomy**

A post-mastectomy bra has pockets to accommodate prostheses, of course, but that’s not all. Some are designed to cover irregularities at the underarm; others are higher at the top to cover upper chest scars. Also important is that they are made from soft, breathable fabrics like moisture-wicking microfibre for comfort.

Whenever you try on a bra, make sure you try it with a prosthesis. If you have a prosthesis on one side, fit the other, intact, breast first. If, on the other hand, you’ve had reconstructive surgery, fit the reconstruction first.

**Kate’s tip:** “As well as a specific post-mastectomy bra, a soft cup bra with high sides, a high centre gore and a stretchy upper cup can also take a prosthesis.”
First bra

First bras, or teen bras, are designed for teenagers whose busts are still developing. It’s important to fully support your breasts even from a young age, since any loss of elasticity is impossible to regain later.

What to look for? Avoid wearing underwired bras, which can restrict growing breast tissue, and make sure that your breasts are fully contained inside the cups. Look for a bra that fits well when fastened on the tightest hook – that way, you’ll still have room to grow into it.
Breast awareness

We all know that it’s important to check your breasts regularly but how many of us actually do it? It doesn’t have to be complicated. According to Breast Cancer Care, the UK’s leading provider of breast cancer information and support, it’s simply a question of getting to know how your breasts look and feel normally so that you notice any changes quickly and report them to your doctor.

While most changes will be benign, early detection can mean more effective treatment if cancer is found. There is no set way to check your breasts and you don’t have to look and feel at the same time but you should find time to do it regularly.

Anyone with breast cancer or breast health concerns can call the Breast Cancer Care freephone helpline on 0808 800 6000 (for Typetalk prefix 18001) or visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk.

The breast awareness 5-point code:
- Know what is normal for you.
- Know what changes to look and feel for.
- Look and feel.
- Report any changes to your GP without delay.
- Attend routine breast screening if you are aged 50 or over.
The bra deconstructed

Have you ever wondered what bra manufacturers mean when they talk about ‘wings’, ‘slings’ or ‘centre gores’?

Here’s our jargon-busting guide to all the pieces that make up a bra – this can range from 10 pieces for a very basic style to 48 for the most complicated.
1. **APEX**
The apex is the part of the bra where the strap joins the cup.

2. **STRAP**
The strap keeps the cup in place but should not take the main weight of the breast.

3. **ADJUSTER**
The adjuster is used to tighten or loosen the strap accordingly. Its position on the strap can vary and depends on the design of the bra.

4. **HOOK AND EYE**
You can usually fasten a bra on the first, second or third hook and eye. We recommend that when you buy a new bra, it fits snugly when fastened on the loosest hook and eye. This is because your bra will stretch over time and you will need to use the middle and tightest hooks to keep it firm later on.

5. **CUP**
The cup is the part of the bra that supports the breast. The bottom part of the cup is often lined for extra support.

6. **CENTRE FRONT / CENTRE GORE**
The centre front or centre gore is the piece of the bra that fits flat against the chest in between the breasts. It is sometimes part of a cradle.

7. **CRADLE**
A cradle helps position the wires and cups securely against the chest. Many women therefore find bras with cradles more comfortable to wear.

8. **SLING**
Some bras incorporate a sling into the inner cup to provide additional support to the side of the breast to stop it from spreading out to the side. It is popular to use a sling in cups for larger breasts or for any size when the outer fabric is too delicate to provide enough support on its own.

9. **WING**
The wings, when fastened at the back, not only secure the bra to the body but also pull the wires into position to sit around the breast.

10. **UNDERBAND / BOTTOM BAND**
The underband or bottom band runs along the bottom of the bra and anchors the bra to the body. It should fit snugly against the body, providing the majority of the support for the breasts.
Caring for your bra

Why does a bra need extra care?

Your bra might look delicate, but it is very hard working. This is why lingerie manufacturers select fabrics not just because they look pretty but for their technical qualities too – softness or elasticity, for example. The more careful you are with your bra, the longer it will retain these qualities.

Can’t I just throw it in the washing machine with everything else?

Well, you can (unless it’s made of a special fabric like silk) but it won’t last nearly as long. The biggest problem is that a machine wash can stretch the elastic in a bra, and there’s a good chance that it won’t recover. Three more good reasons why you should avoid the washing machine:

• The underwire could come out of its casing and damage your machine.
• Wash a moulded t-shirt bra in the machine and you could crinkle the foam that gives it shape.
• Hooks and eyes can get caught in – and damage – any embroideries.
If I do use a machine, how can I minimise any damage?

Wash your bras inside a laundry bag – it’s also a good idea to fasten them first so that there’s less chance of the hooks catching on any lace or embroideries. Set your machine to a delicates cycle on the lowest temperature, and drip dry.

Can I dry a bra in the tumble drier?

No. Even on a low heat setting, the temperature will damage any elastane in the fabric. And if you dry a padded bra in the tumble drier, the padding is likely to shrink and create wrinkles. Result? A less than smooth t-shirt bra.

Any hand washing tips?

Wash your bras in cold water, using a delicates detergent. Drip dry – most bras are made from delicate or synthetic fabrics that dry quickly – and don’t wring them out.

If I look after my bra properly, then, how long should it last?

Properly looked after, an everyday bra should last up to two years. Try not to wear the same bra two days in a row – alternate your bras to give the fabric time to recover.

How should I store my bras?

Storing your lingerie properly will help keep it looking good for longer. T-shirt bras need special attention: you can fold them in half and put one cup inside the other, or stack them side by side, but whatever you do, take care not to dent the cup shape by stuffing them into a drawer. Make extra room by folding your non moulded underwired bras in the centre and stacking them vertically one next to the other.
Styles of bra

We recommend building a bra wardrobe – a small stock of everyday bras, a speciality bra, a sports bra and a special occasion set. Here is our glossary of styles available.

**Push-up**
A push-up bra is designed to push your breasts inwards and upwards to create a better cleavage under those plunging necklines.

**Balconette**
A balconette is a sexy style of bra with a low neckline that goes straight across the bust. It has wide set straps for a square neckline. The cups are seamed to push the bust upwards to give a shelf like appearance similar to the look created by a corset.
Moulded

So called because the cup is moulded from a single piece of foam or fabric – so that it’s seamless.

T-shirt

Like a moulded bra, a t-shirt bra’s cups are seamless. What makes it a t-shirt bra is the thickness: a t-shirt bra has a level of padding to ensure that your nipples do not show through when you’re wearing a figure hugging top.

Half cup

Lingerie manufacturers do not always agree on what makes a half cup bra but as a general rule, it’s one where the cup stops just above the nipple. It is generally more suitable for a smaller cup but larger cup brands are becoming increasingly skilled at creating supportive bras that give a good impression of a half cup.
**Soft cup or soft bra**
A soft cup bra is one without an underwire. Maternity and sports bras tend to be soft cups, and soft cups are also a good solution for teenagers who can’t wear underwired bras while they are still growing, as well as for some larger cup size women who cannot find an underwired bra to fit.

**Minimiser**
Minimiser bras are designed with a specific need in mind: if you take a larger cup size, how do you deal with those gaping tops? A minimiser bra flattens the breast tissue so that your breasts do not protrude so much – and you can do up your shirt buttons.
Strapless
Indispensable under tricky tops, a strapless bra deserves a place in every wardrobe. It’s important to get the tension right: too loose, and it won’t give enough support; too tight and it will pull itself down the ribcage.

Sports
The breasts are supported by the Coopers ligaments, which stretch when you exercise. This can cause them to sag – and once this happens, they will never recover. A good sports bra, however, can cut breast movement by over 50 per cent. Look for seamless cups and cushioned fastenings to stop the bra chafing against your skin, while moisture-wicking fabrics help keep you cool. As for support, look for wide, non-stretch straps.

Full cup
Again, lingerie manufacturers don’t always agree on what makes a full cup, but a full cup bra is generally one where the cups cover the entire breast.
Defining moments in bra history

1907
The word ‘brassiere’ first appears in American Vogue.

1912
‘Brassiere’ enters the Oxford English Dictionary.

1913
American socialite Mary Phelps Jacob buys a sheer evening dress. Not wanting to wear a corset under it, she fashions her own underwear from two silk handkerchiefs and some ribbon. She is granted the first US patent for the brassiere the following year.

1925
Enter the shaped bra: the Kestos bra, fashioned from two triangular pieces of fabric, has elastic shoulders, a crossover back, and buttons at the front to create two distinct cups. A commercial success, it still looks modern today.

1928
Russian immigrant Ida Rosenthal and her husband William found Maidenform in the US. In years to come she will pioneer the idea of different cup sizes for different women, as well as patenting a bra strap fastener.

1935
Warner’s creates the cup sizing system.

1941
Howard Hughes anticipates the future of lingerie when he designs a seamless, push-up bra for Jane Russell to wear under a tight silk blouse in The Outlaw. It is, however, denied a place in fashion history when Jane Russell later claims that she never wore it.

1964
Canadian company Canadelle invents the Wonderbra, designed to ‘lift and separate’ the bust. It’s still causing a stir 30 years later when Eva Herzigova stars in the ‘Hello Boys’ ad campaign.
1967
Anne Bancroft reveals her lace bra in The Graduate – and a generation swoons.

1977
Hinda Miller, Lisa Lindahl and Polly Smith sew two jockstraps together and call it the Jogbra. The sports bra is invented.

1990
Underwear-as-outerwear: Jean Paul Gaultier creates a conical bra for Madonna’s Blonde Ambition tour. It’s a defining fashion moment.

1997
Italian manufacturer Santoni develops a circular knitting machine that allows a bra to be knitted all in one go, instead of separate pieces needing to be cut and sewn together. This leads to today’s increasingly popular seamless, tagless bras.
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**Bra finder**
Our bra finder takes the hard work out of finding the right bra for you. Simply select your size, style, colour and brand from the drop down menus to narrow down your search.

**Fast delivery, free returns**
Order from figleaves.com and you’ll receive your order within three to five working days. Delivery costs only £2 within the UK, or you can choose express delivery for £6. If anything doesn’t fit? Take advantage of our free, no-quibble returns policy.