

# Consumer Choices

## Selecting clothes for older people in your care

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**Older people in your care need to make their own clothing decisions when possible. You can help them make wise consumer choices.**

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*Aunt Josie sat in the chair by the window, gazing at the wall. Her expression looked as if the day was cloudy and gray. Her aging skin appeared drawn, its color sallow, made even more so by the yellow house coat she wore.*

*She always used to be well dressed. But now Aunt Josie seemed not to care about her appearance. Her hair, once beautifully coiffed, simply was pulled back with a comb. She always used to wear makeup, but now wore none.*

*Aunt Josie told me she missed her makeup and her good clothes. "But," she said, "it's probably silly to think anyone would even notice."*

Clothing that is neat and clean, fits well, and feels good can boost anyone's morale. Older people in your care often *are* concerned about their appearance. They may be uncomfortable wearing the clothes they have, especially if those clothes are out of date, are in colors or designs that are no longer flattering, are mismatched, or simply no longer fit properly. But in addition to requiring your care—whether in their own home, your home, or a nursing home—they may need your help to select and purchase new clothing. They also may need help to take care of their existing clothing that they do enjoy wearing.

Older people have the right to make choices about their clothing. As a caregiver, you can help them plan for the types of clothing that will make them feel good about their appearance, and that will be easy to wear and care for. When selecting clothing for older people, consider:

- the person's need for clothing that he or she enjoys.
- clothing that enhances appearance, increases independence, allows for function, and provides comfort.

- quality as well as quantity of clothing. "Little" items, such as a favorite tie or scarf, can have a big impact if those items have been features of the person's daily life.
- the availability and accessibility of clothing storage space.
- the type of care the clothing requires. Also consider who will be caring for the clothing.

Before making choices about clothing, it is important to understand how clothing affects people. Clothing provides physical, psychological, and social comfort. (See table 1.) Each of these types of comfort may affect any or all of the others.

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**Table 1. Clothing comfort**

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### **Physical comfort**

Clothing protects people from humidity, heat, and cold, and helps them feel physically comfortable. Characteristics of fabric that affect physical comfort include flexibility, bulkiness, weight, and texture. Garment construction also affects physical comfort.

### **Psychological comfort**

Clothing gives the wearer a sense of well-being. It tells something about the person. Clothing also affects the way others see, think of, and react to the person.

### **Social comfort**

A person can be comfortable or uncomfortable wearing a certain garment or type of clothing in a social situation. Social comfort may be involved when a person wishes to "make an impression" through the clothing he or she wears.

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**Making decisions about clothing can increase an older person's sense of independence.**

## Choices about appearance

When older people invite caregivers into their homes, move into their caregiver's home, or move into a nursing home or other care facility, they are going through a major life change. It may involve adjusting to new people, to new physical surroundings, and to a different daily schedule. Clothing can play an important role in helping older adults maintain a positive self-image in the midst of overwhelming change.

People express their personality in many ways, including through their clothing, hair style, and accessories. A man may have worn a beard all his life, a woman may have worn makeup. If their ability to choose their appearance is taken away, then an opportunity for independence vanishes. Keeping some familiar clothes and personal articles helps them retain some sense of self-control over what is happening to them. Maintaining a sense of choice or guided choice is important.

The stereotype says older people don't care about their appearance. But, research shows:

- most older people think of themselves as younger than they are,
- their sense of fashion reflects their youthful thinking and the fashion of earlier years when they were younger, and
- they like clothing that looks good on them.

Clothing can help older people feel better about themselves and present a positive image to those around them. Sending positive appearance messages may increase older people's opportunities for social interaction. That is especially important for people who must make new acquaintances in a nursing home or other care facility.

## Choices for independence

Choice-making does not need to end just because people require daily assistance in living. Making decisions about their clothing can increase older people's sense of independence and help them feel better about themselves.

You can help older people in your care think about clothing design. Consider their physical condition, their amount and type of physical activity, and their ability to dress and undress themselves. Ask them some questions to help them make clothing decisions that reflect their choices:

- What outfits do they like to wear most?
- What clothing styles do they like, dislike?

- What are their favorite colors and fabrics?
- Do they like to "dress up" occasionally?

Older people may be unable to shop for clothing and accessories by themselves—but this needn't end their independence. Perhaps you could take them on a shopping trip. Or, you could shop for them—selecting items in the specific colors and styles they've requested. A local clothing store may let you take items on approval—the older person then could choose at home. Catalogs make it easy to shop at home. Some specialty catalogs offer clothing designed for people with physical disabilities.

## Choices for daily functioning

*Mobility* refers to a person's ability to walk, move around, and function on a daily basis. Mobility may be limited by clothing that gets in the way—either for the person wearing it or for others who assist him or her. For example, long ties, skirts, jackets, and sweaters, or extremely full styles can get tangled in wheelchairs or braces, causing spills and falls.

Most people like clothing that is easy to put on and take off. If a person needs help getting dressed and undressed, clothes that go on and come off easily help everyone concerned. Clothes that fit loosely without being baggy are easier to get on and off. Features such as front openings, large zipper pulls, hook-and-loop tape closures, or wrap styles may help.

Clothing that is chosen with function in mind allows more comfortable movement in daily activities. Certain clothing features provide freedom of movement, including:

- shirt or bodice backs with adequate width. Pleats in back are helpful.
- blouson bodices with adequate back length to cover curvature.
- sleeves with adequate shoulder width, that are not too tight.
- raglan, dolman, or kimono sleeves to better fit rounded shoulders.
- waistlines loose enough to expand when the person is seated. If the waist is elastic, be sure it does not cut.
- yokes or gathers to flatter the bodice.
- front-opening styles.
- large neck openings.
- pants legs that are large enough to pull over a cast, brace, or catheter.
- two-piece garments. The top and bottom may be of different sizes for better fit.
- accessible front pockets for carrying personal items.

For people who cannot dress themselves, consider:

- garments that open out flat, so the wearer can be rolled onto them.
  - pop-over tent styles with ample neck openings.
  - zip, snap, or hook-and-loop tape closures.
  - smooth fabrics that may slip on easily.
- However, such fabrics may make it more difficult to grip and assist the wearer when he or she must be moved.
- skirts or gowns that wrap to close in back and divide while the wearer is seated. (This feature is especially helpful for people with incontinence.)

### Choices for physical comfort, safety, convenience, and care

**Physical comfort.** Clothing can help people adjust to temperature variations in their environment. In order to be comfortable, many older people need clothing that provides extra warmth. Clothing helps insulate the body by trapping and holding warm body heat in dead-air spaces between the body and layers of clothing. Table 2 lists clothing choices for both cold and warm environments.

**Safety.** Table 3 lists clothing choices for avoiding certain safety hazards. Safety from fire is a special concern for older people. Some may lack the agility to step away from a spark or flame source quickly enough to avoid having their clothing ignite. Lightweight, thin, or napped fabrics will catch fire most readily. Wool has some natural flame resistance. However, unless clothing is labeled flame resistant, you should assume all clothing will burn readily. Flame resistant clothing is a good choice for people who smoke, but is not widely available.

Another safety concern is preventing falls or mechanical entrapment from clothing entanglement. Much of today's clothing is so strong that it doesn't tear easily. Some people may not have sufficient strength and stability to prevent injury if they were pulled off balance. The safe choice is clothing that fits close to the body.

With elderly people, falls often cause broken hips, especially among those with osteoporosis. Now hip protectors absorb the shock of falls and can reduce the likelihood of hip fractures. They are offered in two basic styles: 1) as underclothing or 2) as a belt to wear outside daytime clothes. Although purchase cost seems high at first glance (from \$130-180.00 in 2003), prevention of pain, suffering and medical costs make them seem a good investment.

A concern of women who tested the protectors in early research with the underwear style was the appearance of added hip bulk. The most convenient source of these is online. For example see: <http://www.hipprotector.com/> or [www.age-in-place.com/hipprotectors.html](http://www.age-in-place.com/hipprotectors.html).

**Convenience.** Urinary incontinence leads to clothing problems that are inconvenient for both the older person who has lost bladder control and the caregiver. Loss of control can be caused by disease or injury at any point in a person's life, but it is common in older people. Sometimes incontinence can be minimized or treated and cured, so a physician always should be consulted at the onset.

Incontinence products are meant to reduce inconvenience and embarrassment. They help reduce the need for frequent clothing and bedding changes. Various designs, closure systems, and absorbency levels are available in both disposable and reusable incontinence products. These include briefs, belted undergarments, liners, shields, and bed or chair

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**Table 2. Clothing choices for cold and warm environments**

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**For cold environments, consider:**

- pile fabrics such as terry cloth or velour
- long sleeve shirts, sweaters, and robes
- clothing that can be layered
- insulated socks, slippers, and gloves
- thermal underwear
- warm head coverings
- soft fabrics such as sweat shirt fleece

**For warm environments, consider:**

- light-weight cotton or cotton blends
  - light-weight sweaters or jackets that can be layered
  - loose-fitting clothes
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**Table 3. Clothing choices for safety**

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**To avoid this hazard ...Consider these points**

Fire	Avoid frilly nightwear or garments with brushed fabric surfaces.
Falls	Choose slippers and shoes with nonslip soles, low or wedge-type heels. Avoid long robes. Wear hip protectors to avoid fractures.
Sheet burns	Wear socks in bed.
Wheelchair problems	Avoid loose, long, full sleeves; long robes; and long ties.
Poor circulation	Elastic stockings or supports may help, but tight bands may cut circulation.

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**Table 4. Tips for choosing incontinence products**

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**When choosing incontinence products, consider:**

- the wearer's physical condition
- the frequency of changing required
- convenience of changing
- purchase costs
- time required and cost of care and upkeep of reusables
- disposal options for disposables

**Reusable and belted undergarments:**

- may be less visible, less bulky, and therefore more comfortable than disposables
  - are less likely to produce potentially embarrassing rustling noises as the wearer moves
  - may be less convenient to change when the wearer is away from home
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pads. Sometimes sanitary napkins, tissues, or related products are used. Disposables have the convenience of immediate disposal after soiling, but reusables can be laundered often.

Studies of nursing home residents show that disposables are more likely to improve the skin conditions of wearers than are reusable products. Table 4 lists tips for choosing incontinence products.

**Care.** Practical choices for convenient clothing care include fabrics, styles, and colors that don't show soiling and are easily laundered. For people living in a nursing home or other care facility, consult with the staff about clothing care procedures and storage of out-of-season clothes. Durable fabric is important because rigorous laundering procedures often include high temperatures for washing and drying. Because of the volume of laundry, staff usually can't give personal care to each resident's clothing. Select clothes that are easily marked for identification. Mealtime cover-ups, smocks, or bibs reduce the frequency of food stains on good clothes.

### **Clothing needs will change**

The clothing needs of older people in your care will change. As their needs change, older

people have the right to make choices about their clothing. As a caregiver, you can help them with their clothing decisions. Good clothing choices for older people enhance appearance, increase independence, allow for daily functioning, and provide comfort, safety, and convenience.

### **For more information**

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