

Attack of the...



FOAM FALSIES



**Like something from a sci-fi flick, padded bras have taken over our stores and closets. ZOE CORMIER sizes up the offerings and discovers that bigger isn't always better**

The weirdest thing has happened to me. When I was 14, my breasts were the perfect size. Now they're too small.

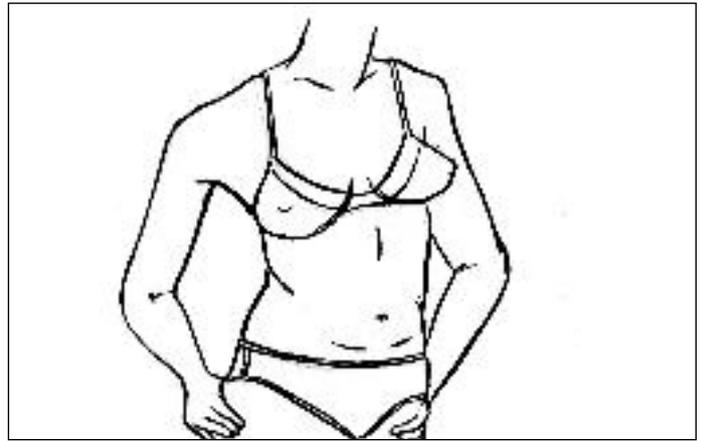
Let me clarify: I don't mean that they shrank, or that I think they're too small, or that any of my partners have thought they were too small. I mean that according to the people who make the things I wear over my breasts, they are too small. Almost every single bra available for sale is designed to make my chest look bigger. But why?

Ten years ago, almost everything on the racks was made to fit my breasts the way they really are. Lacy, spandexy, sporty, silky, satiny, wired — throughout my teens, I could always find something that fit comfortably and made my small breasts look pretty. Although stores sold a variety of padded and push-up bras, they were never the main attraction.

Now the vast majority of what you see in mainstream stores is lined with foam in one way or another. The most common are "moulded cup" or "contoured" bras, which have a uniform layer of foam throughout the whole cup. Lingerie companies don't use the word "padded" to describe these, because they don't have a thick pad of foam at the bottom the way push-up bras do. But these bras still change the size and shape of the breasts within. Face it: they're padded.

I don't like them. They look fake and make me feel silly. When I put one on, anyone can tell I'm wearing something extra. They don't move with my body. If I lie on my side, I slide out of the stiff, inflexible cups. It's like my breasts are supposed to mould themselves to the bra, not the other way around.

My friends who have big breasts aren't fond of padding either. Take Jana Shoemaker, for example. The 26-year-old law student used to be a DDD and couldn't fit into anything chain stores sold. After having a



## HOW TO HOLD UP YOUR BREASTS WHILE LETTING THEM BE THEMSELVES

Want to treat your bosom buddies with the respect they deserve? There are several ways to support and flatter small- and medium-sized breasts without padding.

- If you can afford it, seek out boutiques that stock European and pricier lingerie, where you'll find classic designs made with silk, satin and lace. You may pay more than at a chain store, depending on what they carry, but a well-made bra will make you feel good no matter what your size. Plus, it'll last forever if you take good care of it. If these shops are out of your price range, check second-hand stores for gently used upscale-brand bras.
- Cut out the wire. Even a padless bra can be too restrictive if it has an underwire, depending on your body shape. There's an easy way to fix this problem: cut a little slit in the fabric where the end of the wire is. Slide out the wire, leaving only a tiny hole in the bra. If you want to change it back, just slide the wire back through the hole and seal it with a couple of stitches — no harm done. (My mother, who designed clothing, taught me this trick.)
- Shelf tanks. They're not for everybody, but if you have small breasts, they are very comfy. They hug your breasts gently and allow them to hang the way they want to. You can layer these under just about anything.
- Stretchy yoga tops. I don't mean the high-tech stuff they sell at Lululemon Athletica. I mean light T-shirts and tanks made of nothing but soft, stretchy fabric. Shelfless, strapless, seamless. Astonishingly comfy and surprisingly supportive. I've seen very busty girls wear these comfortably without a bra.
- Camisoles. A lot of stores are trying to pass off standard-issue tank tops as "camisoles," but don't be fooled. A real camisole is a silky or lacy undershirt that, if well made, will support your breasts on its own with good stitching and a bit of elastic or wire. Quality camisoles might cost a bit, but you can almost always find them at good vintage stores. **ZC**

breast reduction, she found it thrilling to be able to purchase C cup bras for less than \$100.

"But then padding really took off — all padding all the time," she says. "The padded bras I bought did not last very long. In less than a year, the padding loses its shape; it gets bumpy and lumpy."

She's right — now it's all padding, all the time. I didn't realize just how popular padding was until I went shopping recently for a low-cut lace underwire bra with wide-set straps, a classic style that makes me feel curvy and feminine without making me feel inadequate. I figured it wouldn't be hard to find one in less than an hour in downtown Toronto. I was wrong.

Unpadded bras have almost completely disappeared. You can still find good unpadded designs at high-end boutiques, but many cost \$100 or more. Stores targeting younger (i.e., less wealthy) shoppers usually offer bras with moulded cups. Stiff, round bras are arranged in big circles on display tables, each bra nestled into the one in front of it, like spoons in a cutlery drawer. While shopping in these stores, the message becomes clear: women may come in all shapes and sizes, but we're ultimately supposed to look the same.

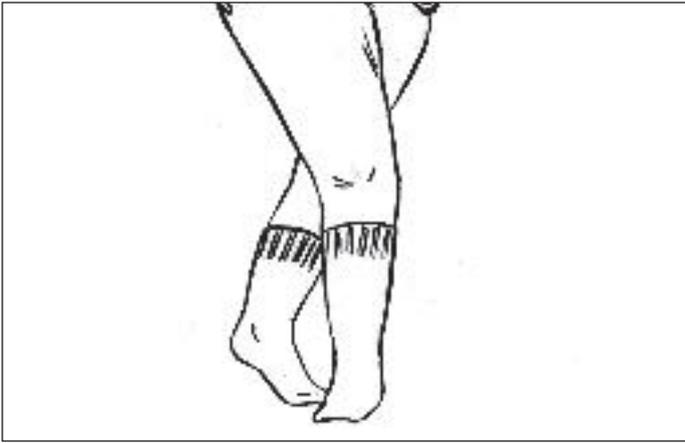
Mainstream bra sellers such as the Gap, Jacob and La Vie En Rose carry very few designs made without lining. And usually the few unpadded bras they do stock are poorly made: the lace is cheap and scratchy or the stitching is poorly done.

I spent three hours going from store to store without finding anything I liked, getting sweatier, crankier and more frustrated. Every store was packed to the rafters with padded bras, and nobody thought this was unusual. Salespeople looked at me with blank stares when I asked for an unpadded bra. Fresh-faced 14-year-old shoppers swirled about the racks, eager to hide their brand new breasts behind padded shields.

In a moment of desperation, I went into La Senza, a store I typically avoid because of the prominent padding in their window displays. (Also, La Senza Girl sells padded bras for preadolescents, which bothers me on so many levels.) They had only one unpadded design in the whole store. Keeping an open mind, I tried it on.

Ouch! The bra had that most heinous of design flaws: a seam that ran right over my nipple, without a piece of soft fabric considerably sewn over it to shield me from chafing. No wonder the kids weren't buying it.

I almost had a tantrum, right then and there. Didn't anybody think unpadded bras were worth making anymore? I called the store's corporate headquarters to find out, mentioning that I was writing an article for *Shameless*.



The public relations rep apologetically told me that after inspecting the *Shameless* website, La Senza declined to speak with me. I was stunned, as it's the first time the magazine has been outright refused an interview. I wonder what these padding-pushers have to hide. Maybe the company is just shy of indie media after the bad press it got several years ago about the Thai sweatshops its bras were made in.

Calvin Klein, a company that has always made sexy and affordable unpadded bras — although they, too, have a history of using sweatshops — was more accommodating. The company has discontinued a lot of their classic unpadded designs, but are coming out with new styles for younger women that will only be thinly contoured. I suppose that's a start. But must they put the foam in there? Why can't they just let us look like ourselves?

Jennifer Klein (no relation to Calvin), who owns *Secrets From Your Sister* in Toronto, enlightens me: one of the main reasons many girls prefer padded bras is because they hide their nipples.

I suspected girls were flocking to padding because they wanted bigger breasts, but nipple concealment? I never worried about my nipples showing through my shirts when I was in high school.

"I always tell my customers, 'People are not looking at your nipples — they're looking at your breasts,'" Klein says. "I try to discourage girls from hiding their nipples. They are a natural part of your body. We are pro-nipple."

I'm glad to hear somebody is. Aren't nipples supposed to be beautiful? And boys have them, too, so what's so embarrassing?

Forty years ago, pert nipples were okay, while visible bra straps were the worst fashion sin. These days, women co-ordinate the colour of their bra straps with their outfits and worry instead about visible nipples and panty lines. It seems we're supposed to be ashamed of wearing underwear, but proud of wearing padded bras. I think something is wrong here.

Alexandra Armillas thinks so, too. A designer with decades of experience (including a 20-year stint with Christian Dior), she teaches lingerie design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. "It has been my mission in life to teach my students that Victoria's Secret is not lingerie," she says. "I am not a proponent of padding. I come from a generation that called them 'falsies.'"

But the rise of breast implants in the 1980s, the relaunch of the Wonderbra in the early '90s, and the subsequent popularization of the padded bra by lingerie giant Victoria's Secret completely changed the market — now about 90 percent of bras for sale are padded.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF BREASTS: BIGGER WASN'T ALWAYS CONSIDERED BETTER

**2500 BC (ancient Greece):** Women on the island of Crete wear leather bands underneath their breasts (which were left naked) to shove them upward and make them look bigger.

**450 BC to 285 AD (Roman Empire):** Women are encouraged to make their figures look more masculine by wearing tight-fitting bands of fabric or leather around their breasts to flatten them.

**300 to 1000 (Middle Ages):** Breasts are generally ignored, much like the rest of the body, which medieval Christianity considers sinful. Breasts are neither smushed down nor shoved out; most women just wear loose-fitting blouses.

**1000 to 1400 (Renaissance):** As the arts flourish, so does fashion and the attention given to the female figure. But in keeping with the spirit of Christian modesty, women wear tight-fitting bodices that minimize their breasts.

**1400 to 1800:** After two thousand years of being downplayed, breasts start to get more attention: bodices have evolved into corsets, the most evil of all female garments. Corsets tend to flatten the lower half of the breasts, while shoving the upper half up, creating round, plump cleavage. Women spend 400 years trying to make their waists look impossibly small by forcing their bodies into steel cages, frequently suffering broken ribs and damaged lungs.

**1890s:** French corset makers begin to experiment with new designs that support the breasts from the shoulders, instead of shoving them up from below. They don't get much attention.

**1913:** American socialite Mary Phelps Jacob, unhappy with the idea of wearing a bulky corset under her sheer silk dress, fashions a makeshift bra from two silk handkerchiefs and a ribbon. She then sells her design to Warner Brothers Corset Co., and the rest, as they say, is history.

**1914 to 1918:** Women *finally* stop wearing corsets. With all the young men at war, women take over their factory jobs and need more physical mobility.

**1920s:** Curves are out of fashion and the androgynous "flapper" look is in. Brassieres, which at this time tend to flatten breasts, become popular for the first time. Women spend the next 10 years trying to make their breasts look smaller.

**1930s:** Curves are back in! Bras are created to accentuate instead of minimize. The cup system is developed.

**1950s:** Curves are still in — *really* in. Padded bras are introduced to help small-breasted girls achieve the pointy "sweater girl" look. Women spend the next 10 years trying to make their breasts look bigger.

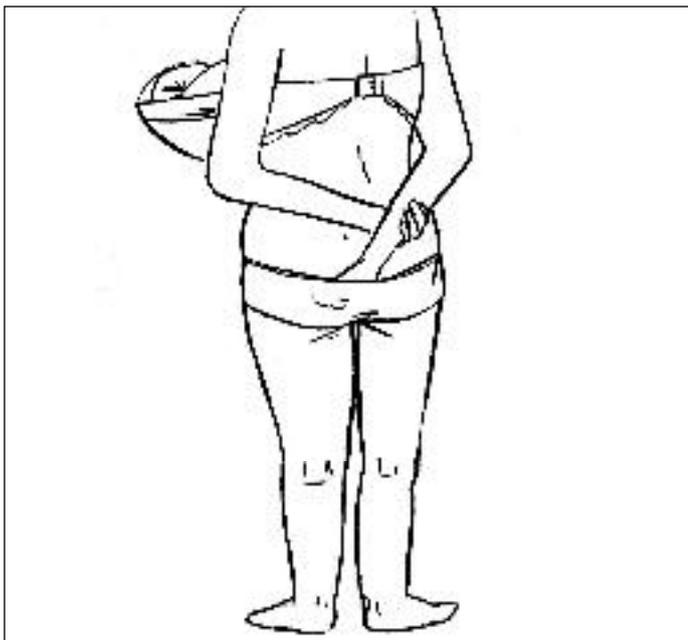
**1960s:** Liberation is in, and for many women, this means bras are out. They don't literally burn them (that's just a myth), but a lot of women do throw all their bras into the trash.

**1970s:** Aerobics are in, Lycra is invented and the sports bra hits the market. Bra sales climb.

**1980s:** Curves are in again, but not the natural kind. The advent of silicone implants allows a whole generation of women to actually make their breasts bigger (instead of just pretending they are).

**1994:** Wonderbra reintroduces the padded bra. The company had made them since the 1960s, but by the early 1990s the bras weren't selling well. Wonderbra relaunches the product with a racy new advertising campaign and aggressive marketing. Sales shoot through the roof, and other lingerie makers (most notably Victoria's Secret) follow the trend.

**2007:** The majority of bras in mainstream stores are padded; stores that target younger women sell almost no unpadded designs whatsoever. **ZC**



York University psychologist and feminist Leeat Granek attributes the rise of padding to the lucrative market for these bras: teens and preteens. “This padding phenomenon is part of the sexualization of young girls in general,” she says. “They are growing up with the message that they need to look sexy all the time — and you can sell more products if you can convince them that they need something in order to look good.”

She reminds me of what media theorist Jean Kilbourne says about advertisers: they take something away from you in order to sell it back to you. For example, douche ads make women feel like their vaginas are not normal and clean so we’ll go out and buy douche to make our vaginas feel normal and clean (see “Honourable Discharge,” page 17).

I think the same thing is happening with padded bras. The message is that if our breasts aren’t perfectly spherical (which few breasts naturally are), we aren’t beautiful. But, if we buy the right bra, we too can be perfectly round and therefore beautiful.

Whether girls are trying to hide their nipples, make their breasts look rounder, or look older and more sexual, one thing is for sure: very few young women wear unpadded bras anymore.

When Armillas surveys her first-year students, almost every single one has only ever worn padded bras. “They have never put on a bra to feel beautiful,” she laments. “They were never taught to celebrate having small breasts like they should.” And there is plenty to celebrate, says Armillas, who has small breasts herself.

“When I was young, I had perfect, beautiful breasts. But if you think I knew that at the time, I did not. I never appreciated them whatsoever, until they changed.”

That, to me, is the saddest thing about the padding bonanza: girls are hiding their bodies behind foamy disguises during the very time in their lives when they have the least reason to. **S**

Zoe Cormier is a freelance writer who splits her time between Toronto and London, England. Her work has been featured in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Ecologist* and *Chatelaine*. Her *Shameless* cover story on vaginal plastic surgery was nominated for a 2005 National Magazine Award.

## SIZE LIES

Everyone knows how bra sizes work: A cups are small and Ds are big, while B and C are somewhere in between, right? Not true!

The little-known truth is that the cup size of a bra is not static, but relative to the band size. (The band size is the number of inches around your chest, measured under your breasts.) What this means is that the cup of a 36A bra is the same as a 34B, which is the same as a 32C, and so on. I repeat: the cup size by itself tells you nothing of the volume of the breast within.

Among my friends, this news was met with shocked denial, and you, too, may wonder if my intelligence is reliable. It is. Last fall, at the ripe old age of 30, I visited *Secrets From Your Sister*, a body-positive lingerie store in Toronto, to have my first real bra fitting. The experience turned out to be as liberating as it was educational.

I should mention that my breasts are pretty small. While I now consider the twins close friends, my insignificant rack was once a significant source of distress. When I was 16, my mother asked what I wanted for Christmas, and I replied, “Breasts.” She insisted she’d already given me a perfectly good pair. She was right, of course, but living in a breast-obsessed culture, it’s hard to escape the desire for bigger boobs. Despite my acceptance, I’ve always harboured a small secret desire for them to be just a *little* bigger.

At the fitting, I got my wish — sort of. As it turns out, my bra size is 30D. 30D! I don’t think I’ve laughed as much in my life as I did when I heard that. (I used to buy A-cup bras.) My colleagues started calling me “porn star,” and when I told my beau of my new size, he replied, “Wow, that’s amazing, because I just found out I have a 12-inch penis!”

It then occurred to me how much of our self-perception is wrapped up in our cup sizes, and how we give them different meanings. What I love most about knowing I have D-cup breasts is that it busts open a stereotype, so to speak, leaving one fewer way to categorize a woman.

How is it that all women have breasts, but don’t know how bra sizes work, and therefore wear the wrong size? (Apparently 85 percent of women wear ill-fitting bras.) My initial conclusion was that it must be a conspiracy, propagated by television. But it’s actually not that surprising when you consider most women figure out their bra size by trial and error, based on a limited range of options.

At *Secrets From Your Sister*, which fits all sizes, A to D is considered small, DD to F in the middle, and FF to JJ on the large end. But most stores stock only A, B, C and D cups, with band sizes from 32 to 38 inches. Carrying a wider range would require an investment in specialty merchandise and trained bra fitters, making it too expensive for the average mall store to bother — so we’re left to fend for ourselves. People with self-diagnosed bra sizes are often surprised to learn that they should be wearing, say, a 34G instead of the 38D they usually buy.

Clearly, breasts come in more than just four sizes, and I love knowing that the question “What’s your cup size?” has just about as much meaning as the size of your breasts to begin with. **JESSICA JOHNSTON**