

The Sports Bra Revolution

Running shoes aside, it's the most important piece of gear a female runner puts on her body. But for all the time (and money) you spend debating the level of cushioning you need and tracking the miles you logged on a pair of sneakers, how often do you think about how you're protecting your boobs on the run?

BY ASHLEY MATEO

How's this for a statistic: At least 32 percent of female runners report discomfort as a result of an ill-fitting sports bra, according to research published in the *The British Medical Journal*. Discomfort doesn't just mean sore breasts; it could mean anything from straps digging into shoulders, a bottom band that's too tight, lack of ventilation, and even chafing.

You may be surprised to hear that all that discomfort is actually affecting running performance. Women lose up to four centimeters of stride length due to poorly controlled breast movement while running—which, over the length of a marathon, could translate to running an extra mile, according to a recent study conducted by Brooks Running Co. in conjunction with the University of Portsmouth.

"When women run without adequate support, research also reveals more muscle activity in the upper body as women may tense to try and limit how much their breasts move," explains Brogan Horler, a researcher at the University of Portsmouth who studies breast motion and health. "We've also seen increases in ground reaction forces, which may be linked to a runner attempting to cushion their strides to limit breast movement, and increases in levels of

Finding A Truly Perfect Fit

All of these tech advancements mean nothing for you, though, if you aren't buying a bra that fits right. It's suggested that as many as 70 to 100 percent of women are wearing the wrong bra size, according to research by Jenny Burbage, PhD, a sports biomechanist at the University of Portsmouth. Don't be a statistic. Shop with these seven expert-vetted guidelines in mind next time you're shopping.

1 Know your bra size! Get fitted at a specialty bra store or even a department store to figure out your correct breast size; then, when you go into a sports store, you're better equipped to try on the right size from the get-go and more accurately convert the sizing.

2 Choose a high-impact design. Running is a high-impact sport. As cute and fun as lightweight, strappy designs may look, they won't provide the support you need if you're larger than an A or B cup.

3 Check the cups. If your breast is spilling over the top or out the sides, it's too small; if the front of the cup shows wrinkling, it's too large. With encapsulation bras, the center panel should be laying as close to your chest as possible, if not actually touching.

perceived exertion."

This is all because bras haven't changed that much since the first jogbra—in which two jock straps were disassembled and sewn together to create compressive cups—was released in 1977, explains LaJean Lawson, Ph.D., adjunct professor of exercise and sport science at Oregon State University and long-time consultant for Champion. The idea of breast support for sport wasn't new, it was just the first time someone did something about it besides binding them

in cloth or leather or hijacking a corset with slightly more flexible material.

By 1984, sports bras had evolved enough to include compression and encapsulation technology: Compression sports bras literally compress the breasts to the body and work well for smaller breasted women (usually A-C cups), says Lawson, and encapsulation bras "divide and conquer" by separating each breast into its own cup and are better for women with D+ cups.

But it's only been in the past few years



SHUTTERSTOCK



4 The wider the straps, the better. "If you double the width of the strap, you can almost cut the pressure per square inch in half," says Lawson. Either way, avoid straps that lay too close to the neck (especially with racerbacks), because they can irritate the muscles around your neck.

5 Do star jumps in front of the mirror. Ideally, you should mimic the activity a sports bra is for when trying one on; "star jumps have been shown to be a high breast movement-inducing exercise, so they're good test to see if the bra is restricting movement well enough," says Horler.

6 Check for seams and stitching. Design elements like this may seem unimportant, but if your arms is rubbing against something at any point, that's really going to show up after about six miles, says Lawson—hello, chafing.

7 Check the bottom band. See if you can fit two fingers between your body and the band—if you can't, it's too tight and will restrict your breathing; you can fit more, it's too loose and won't be supportive enough.

that there's been a true renaissance in sports bra design. In 2017, after two years of development, Lululemon released their Enlite bra, which features a new high-performance (read: lightweight and breathable) fabric called Ultralux, thick straps to mitigate shoulder pain, and cups that don't just bounce up and down, but move with the breasts in all directions for more natural motion.

The following year, Reebok launched the PureMove Bra, featuring Motion Sense Technology fabric that adapts and

responds accordingly to the shape and velocity of breast tissue, and the type and force of movement (i.e. it stretches less for high-impact workouts like running).

In the spring of 2019, Nike expanded its sports bra sizes, now delivering 57 styles across three support levels in sizes ranging up to an impressive 44G. They also updated the Fe/Nom Flyknit bra, which uses the same Flyknit technology in the company's shoes to ditch the bulk of high-impact bras making it 30 percent lighter than any other bra in their line.

In January, Brooks will launch a new line of Run Bras that aims to reduce motion by up to 70 percent to increase comfort and running performance. One of the significant elements will be the hidden bottom band in the bras; the bottom band typically provides 80 percent of support, but the new design allows it to be flexible in the back and keep the support where you need it in the front under the breast tissue.

So yeah, if it's been awhile, now is the time to upgrade your sports bra.



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The Best Sports Bras On the Market

Six of the latest and greatest, with options for every cup size.

smaller

1 NEW BALANCE Q SPEED RUN CREW BRA TOP

Essentially a compression bra, the high neck and wider band are really flattering; but with two layers of support on the back, it can actually support sizes up to 38D.

\$59.99; newbalance.com

2 NIKE FE/NOM FLYKNIT

Nike used their Flyknit technology to combine encapsulation and compression for a high-support bra sans bulk, stitching, and bonding; it's actually 30 percent lighter than any other bra in Nike's line.

\$80; nike.com

medium

3 UNDER ARMOUR UA VANISH HIGH BRA

The racerback straps attach closer to the center of your back, which won't bug your shoulders but can still support sizes all the way up to 44 DDD.

\$60; underarmour.com

4 LULULEMON RUN TIMES BRA

Built for women with B through E cups that don't want underwire, Lycra adds extra stretch and shape retention to the brand's standard four-way stretch fabric with less pointiness than you'll find in some encapsulation bras.

\$68; lululemon.com

larger

5 CHAMPION SPOT COMFORT SPORTS BRA

Adjustable, gel-cushioned straps reduce pressure and irritation, minimizing molded cups provide a more natural shape, and strategic ventilation keeps heat from getting trapped in your cleavage.

\$48; champion.com

6 BROOKS RUNNING DARE ZIP

Forget sweaty post-run sports bra struggles with this front-zip; with smooth, free-cut edges, and minimal seams, chafing will be a thing of the past.

\$70; brooksrunning.com