

# Clothing: *Silver Threads for the Golden Years*

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## Introduction

Clothing is important to our lives regardless of our age or gender. Its various functions include adornment, protection, self-esteem enhancement, and personality expression.

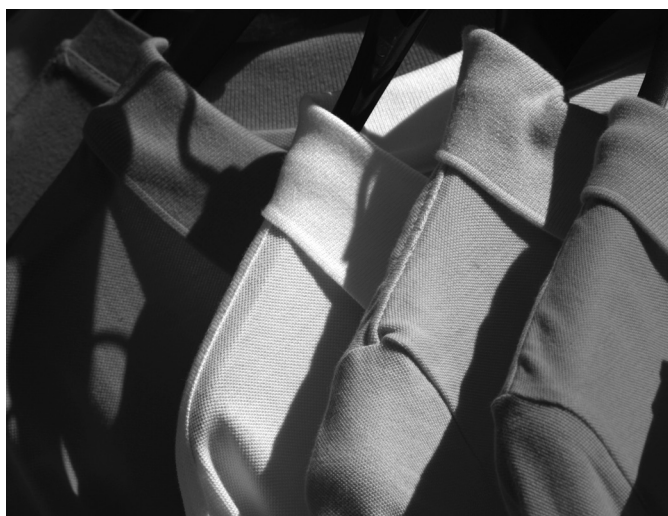
The clothing people wear contributes to their perceived feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and general well-being. Besides economics, factors that traditionally influence the selection of apparel include:

- climate or environment;
- one's state of health;
- individual interest in and knowledge of fashion and personal appearance; and
- one's age — perceived and/or real.

As the human body ages, it naturally experiences a number of changes which affect the physical, emotional, social, and psychological aspects of our lives. Clothing is a tool that can be successfully used to help individuals deal with some of the changes brought about by the aging process.

## The Effects of Aging

The aging process is as varied as the individuals who experience it. Because aging is an individual phenomenon, it is difficult to provide precise information about its effects. The following descriptions are meant only to provide generalized information and to set the stage for the discussion of clothing requirements and needs that follows.



## Physical Changes

As the body ages, it gradually declines in condition and function. Overall body movement becomes slower and less steady. Reflexes are slower, and muscle strength decreases. These conditions tend to result in a more sedentary lifestyle.

Aging makes the body more susceptible to diseases and illness. Osteoporosis, a

thinning of the bone mass, can affect the posture and body structure, while arthritis can attack joints, making movement difficult or painful. These physical impairments make even simple tasks more difficult. The daily care and upkeep of clothing may be a real burden.

Because of these physical changes, safety and healthfulness become key factors to consider when selecting apparel and household textile fabrics for older adults. Comfort and ease of dressing also become high priorities for a great percentage of older individuals.

## Social Changes

The physical changes that older adults experience have a direct effect on social relationships in this age group. Physical limitations may impair or disrupt social activities one has enjoyed over the years. Relationship changes occur throughout life, but those occurring during the later years may be more difficult to accept because the relationships have lasted so long. Changes as a result of retirement, death of family members or the breakup of close friends can be very upsetting.

Keeping active and seeking out and maintaining meaningful relationships are vital ways to handle the social changes that come with the aging process. Clothing that is attractive and fits well can help older individuals feel more comfortable in changing social situations.

## Emotional and Psychological Changes

Emotional well-being is a function of self-worth, one's outlook on life, and perceived control of one's destiny. Gerontologists have identified several common reactions to such stressful events as retirement, declining physical ability, changes in physical appearance, perceived or real loss of control of one's life, and the loss of loved ones. Typical reactions may include withdrawal, apathy, loss of self-esteem, and depression.

Change is an inescapable aspect of aging. However, how a person sees, accepts, and learns to deal with these changes is more important than the actual changes.

Changes associated with aging should not be equated with impaired mental processes. Although senility and Alzheimer's disease can be a result of aging, a decline in mental activity is not a given. Individuals who keep an active mind retain the ability to think clearly and effectively.

Clothing can make a significant contribution to our emotional and psychological well-being. Sometimes called a "second skin," clothing is the aspect of our environment with which we are in closest contact and over which we have the most control. Feeling good about one's self, including one's appearance, promotes a positive self-concept and a healthy state of mind.

## Choosing Appropriate Clothing

Throughout history, clothing has been an important means of nonverbal communication. Not only does it communicate to others how we feel about ourselves, but

it can enhance self-esteem. To be personally satisfying, clothing must:

- facilitate independence in dressing and caring for one's needs;
- be comfortable and allow freedom of movement;
- have the approval of peers and significant others; and
- encourage and promote self-confidence and a feeling of well-being.

Because clothing is our nearest environment, it is often used as an extension of one's own body. To some older adults, clothing becomes the one part of their lives over which they can maintain some degree of control. Yet at the same time, they experience difficulty in maintaining that control when mobility becomes compromised.

The following is a list of difficulties that many older adults encounter, along with some ideas to be considered when choosing clothing.

## Clothing Suggestions

Diminished agility, resulting in difficulty dressing, frequent spills, and safety considerations:

- lightweight, non-bulky fabrics; napped surfaces rather than multiple layers of fabric for warmth; fabrics with "give" such as knits; smooth, slick fabric surfaces; static-free, noncling fabrics;
- printed or textured fabrics to disguise stains;
- fabrics with soil-release finishes; flame-retardant fabrics; water-repellent outerwear; easy-care (wash-and-wear) fabrics and garment styles;
- garment styles with ease but not a lot of fullness; pant/trouser legs tapered at hemline; one-piece garments; stretchy necklines; raglan-style sleeves or large armhole openings; long openings; front openings; elastic waists; hook-and-loop closures; large pulls on zipper tabs; garments with short sleeves, long, close-fitting sleeves, or elastic at the sleeve hem; wrap-style garments (for some individuals);
- sturdy, relatively low-heel slip-on shoes or shoes with hook-and-loop closures; bow ties or pre-tied neckties for men (use a tie pin to secure in place); women's decorative scarves that have been anchored; and
- avoid large white collars, cuffs, or ruffles around bodice/shirt; capes rather than coats and mittens rather than gloves; tea-length hemlines for ladies' formal wear rather than ankle or floor-length hemlines.



### **Arthritic pain in joints:**

- lightweight fabrics; napped surfaces rather than multiple layers of fabric for warmth;
- fabrics (such as knits) and garment styles that stretch or have gentle elasticity; and
- garment designs with front closures, hook-and-loop fasteners, or elastic casings, capes rather than coats and mittens rather than gloves; slip-on shoes or shoes with hook-and-loop closures.

### **Loss of visual acuity:**

- fabrics that vary in texture to assist with garment identification through the sense of touch; shoes and accessories arranged or tagged to be identified by touching;
- fabrics of coordinating colors to simplify mixing and matching; variously shaped tags sewn into garments to assist with coordination of separates; and
- patterns and prints that camouflage spots and stains; easy-care fabrics.

### **Limited sense of smell:**

- easy-care garments and fabrics; washable items; and
- fabrics that do not retain or absorb odors easily (avoid pile, fuzzy, and wooly surfaces, multiple layers, etc.).

### **Increased sensitivity of skin:**

- nonirritating fabrics and garment components; soft, smooth-surface fabrics (flannelette, cotton jersey, brushed nylon, velour, voile, etc.); fine worsted wool rather than woolen variety (worsted are often more expensive, but do not feel as scratchy);
- fabrics without formaldehyde-type finishes (some permanent-press fabrics use formaldehyde finishing techniques);
- fabric to which no potentially allergenic finishes or dyes have been applied (for highly sensitive persons);
- launder or dry clean all new garments before wearing; repeated washings may help minimize some problems; use fabric softener during laundering, and rinse clothing several times to remove all traces of detergent;
- launder clothing in soft water; and

- avoid garments made with transparent thread that may scratch; avoid ruffles at collars or cuffs, snug-fitting elastic casings, snug waistlines and belts, and high necklines.

### **Loss of bladder control:**

- highly absorbent fabrics for specially designed incontinency garments, which have holding capacity adequate for severity of problem;
- garments or bedding with waterproof layer to prevent leakage;
- non-odor retaining fabrics; fabrics treated with antibacterial finish;
- washable, easy-care fabrics and garments; and
- garment designs to simplify dressing and undressing (see recommendations for diminished agility above); separates rather than one-piece garments; abdomen or leg area should be large enough to accommodate padding or urinary appliance; tunics or long tops, wide-legged pants, inseam zippers, or hook-and-loop fasteners; gored, A-line, or gentle fullness in skirt designs.

### **Limited ability to adjust to temperature change:**

- fabrics and garments that help regulate exchange of heat, moisture, and air between body and surrounding environment;
- synthetic fabrics that have wicking ability (i.e., permit moisture to escape from skin surface); fabrics that adjust to individual body heat (microfibers);
- fabrics that trap air, such as napped or quilted fabrics, lined garments, and multiple layers for warmth;
- thin, loosely woven, or knitted fabrics for coolness; items that fit loosely, permitting air to circulate; and
- garment designs that can be layered or removed when necessary; separates rather than single garment pieces.

### **Reduced energy level:**

- fabrics requiring minimal care and upkeep; and
- fabrics and garment designs that facilitate dressing and undressing (see recommendations for diminished agility above); lightweight fabrics are especially important for those with little or no energy.

## **Changes in body structure:**

- fabrics with elasticity or stretch; knits work better than most woven fabrics;
- purchase garments as close to body proportions as possible; alter garments to fit or to accommodate braces, prostheses, or other appliances; ask your county Extension agent for additional information; and
- change your appearance as time changes you, select garment styles that flatter your body.

For additional information about aging and clothing, contact your local county Extension office.