

Working with Folks in Wheelchairs

Young men may have the same problems as ancient women (and vice versa)!

- **Age/Flexibility/Balance/Muscle Tone/Stamina**
How healthy are they?
- **How independent are they?**
Are they still living by themselves? With family? In a care facility? For the latter, keep outfits as “assembled” as possible. If there’s a matching scarf, tack it to the garment’s back neck so it doesn’t get lost during laundering. Remember that many care homes don’t offer dry cleaning, and that care providers don’t have the time to fuss with a lot of details.
- **Fashion vs. Comfort**
Chic women find the universal sweatsuits depressing. Don’t gauge their fashion sense by what they might be wearing at your meeting! Silk, if prewashed, can be attached to a garment which can be laundered from there out for a collar or tie at the neck of a fleece outfit, or as a zipper pull. What have been favorite clothes (occasion?) – color, style, fabric. If they’re stuck, ask them what they hate.
- **Mobility**
How’s their shoulder range of motion? Dexterity in their hands? Can they dress and/or undress themselves? Can they raise their elbows as high as their shoulders? Can they manage a toilet alone? A useful empathy exercise is to seat yourself beside a toilet. Cross your ankles and keep them together to mimic lack of stability. Now get your pants down and yourself transferred, then reverse the process.



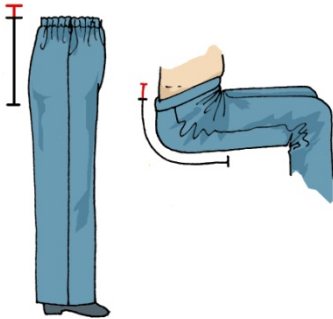
- **Sensitivity/Lack of Sensitivity/Pressure areas**
How sensitive is their skin? People who are in one position a great deal of the time are vulnerable to pressure sores from the weight of their body. Garments that are too tight restrict blood flow, garments that are too loose form wrinkles. Keep the fabric as smooth as possible in contact areas. Be particularly vigilant for those with spinal injuries or other limited feeling.
- **Pain/Confusion**
Schedule appointments when they’ve had a chance to wake up, get their blood sugar up, and for medications to have taken effect. “Discomfort” greatly increases confusion. Watch their body language to see if you’re talking or moving too fast.



- **Closures**

Don't automatically reach for the Velcro, though it has its uses, particularly the softer, flexible kind. Unless carefully mated, it will attack anything else in the washing machine load, and once it's filled itself up with lint it won't work well. Oversized versions of zippers, buttons, snaps, hooks and eyes (the pants/skirts version), and toggles are often easier to use. Consider a lapped application of a zipper with plastic teeth with a custom made, larger than standard pull or tassel. If using ties, be sure the fabric is rough enough to grab itself and stay put.

Altering Pants or a Pants Pattern



A person wearing standard pants needs to stand, sit, kneel, walk and run. A person in a wheelchair needs pants easy to get dressed/undressed in and comfortable to sit in.

Pants that are too snug are difficult to get in and out of; pants that are too loose slide around and create wrinkles that can lead to pressure sores. Pockets are difficult to use when seated; better to eliminate them – suggest an exterior set of pockets that attaches over the wheelchair armrest. Sew seams to the outside if the client approves. Use an existing, reasonably comfortable pair of theirs to check and then work on the following areas.

CB = Center Back, CF = Center Front, WB = Waistband (a = the original pattern, b and c show alterations)

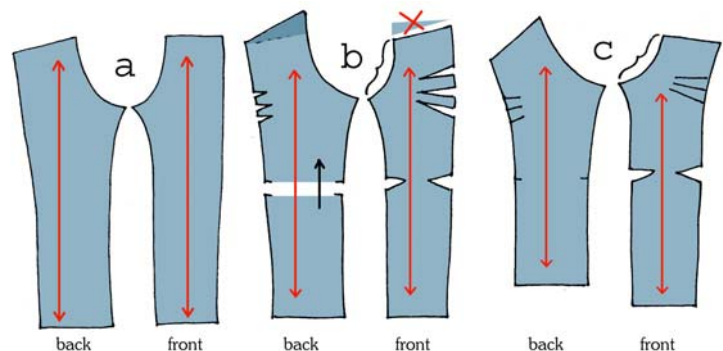
- **Waist**

The length at the back increases when seated, so raise the CB (shaded section in **b**). Lack of mobility often means a poochy stomach, so a lower CF can be more comfortable. Be sure the WB doesn't cut into the stomach.

- **Hip darts**

Pinch out excess fabric formed where the legs meet the pelvis. If you must use pins, use small safety pins.

It's better to quickly baste with your other hand inside so you don't poke them. This also keeps from making the pants too tight. If they're considerably asymmetrical, you'll need to alter each side separately. Pleat out the fabric across the front only if they're slender and flexible, and be sure they can still get the pants up and down. Don't change the shapes of the CF and CB seams (fronts shown bracketed). If you're having difficulty closing the stubby darts in the back pieces while leaving enough room in the seat, leave them in, sew them to the outside of the pants, topstitch them down, and whack them with a hammer to flatten. If the fabric has a lot of vertical give, you can close the front darts and stretch the back to fit.



- **Knees**

Get rid of extra fabric the same way as at the hips, except that you can take out the excess across the back of the knees as long as the legs remain wide enough for easy dressing.

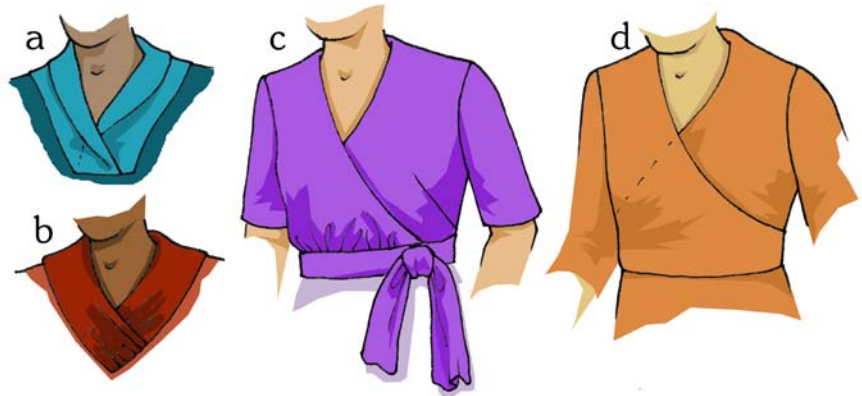
These modifications will put a substantial bend in the patterns. All seams should go together 1:1, as they would with regular pants.

Altering blouses/tops or their patterns



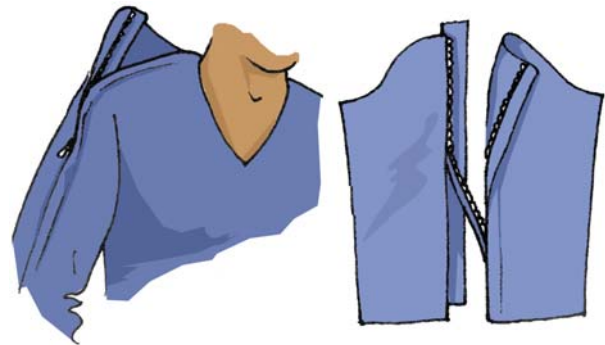
Collars that keep the neck warm yet don't bind are preferable – choose a cowl or a wrap over a turtleneck. As mentioned above, matching or contrast collars in similar or different fabrics can be used for a non-standard look. Silk, if prewashed, can be attached to a garment which can be laundered from there out for a collar or tie at the neck of a fleece outfit, or as a zipper pull.

(a) and (b) are wrapped collars that can be added to a standard t-shirt or sweatshirt pattern. The surplice (c) shown here has a plain back, darted left (under) side, and sleeves that cover the upper arm yet don't come down into the crease of the elbow. The tie should be at the side front rather than the side. Be careful of the partial wrap front (d) as this style can get twisted around during dressing.



The “Dr. Denton”, often seen on baby’s and children’s clothing, is another useful neckline. All of these open well but lay back together smoothly around the neck. This is also good as a bib neckline, particularly for Alzheimer’s patients. Remember that if you put the closures well to the back where the client can’t monkey with them, they may end up leaning against that lump and damaging fragile skin.

People who find it painful getting their arms into tops benefit from having zippers up the outside of at least one, if not both, sleeves. Add a seam down the outside of the arm and run the zipper through it and the shoulder seam all the way to the neck. Use an application that laps to the back and a self-fabric fly underneath. Either a regular or invisible zipper can be used. A partially-assembled sleeve is shown here.



Clothes laundered at nursing homes get “lost” less often if they’re permanently marked. Make labels with indelible pen that give their name and yours.

Most of these modifications are easier to build into a garment made from scratch, but it’s possible, with a little ingenuity, to adapt ready-made clothing.