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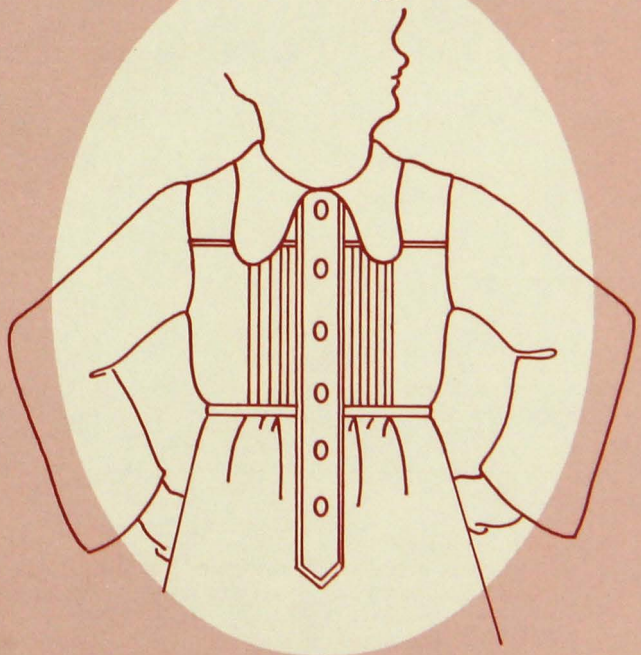
DESIGNS ON 'OLDER' WOMEN



Agricultural Extension Service

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"When you look good you feel better"

Well designed, attractive clothing not only provides comfort, but helps people feel good about themselves. Most people want to be well dressed and elderly women are not exceptions.

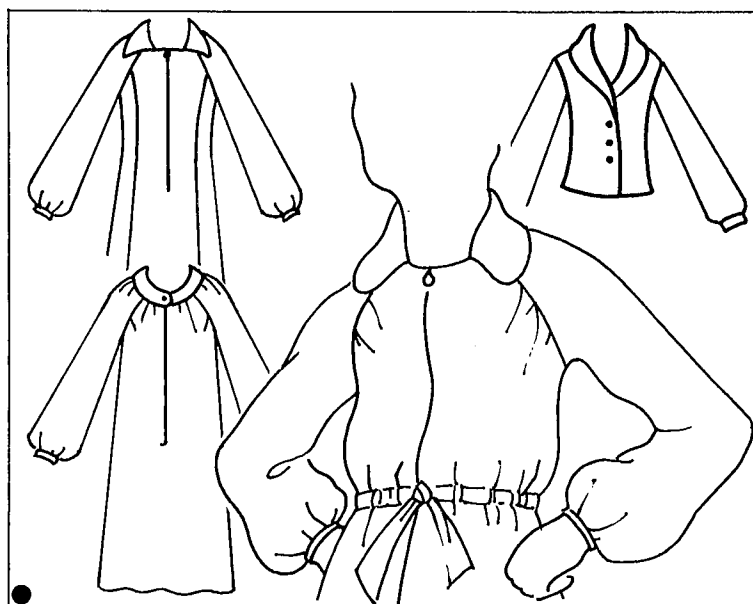
More than eight million Americans are more than 75 years old! By the year 2000, a projected 14 per cent of the population will have lived three quarters of a century. Over one-half of these people are women.

Understandably, the demand for clothing which fulfills the special needs of older women is growing and will continue to grow. Although garment manufacturers have integrated size changes associated with aging into current styles, very few manufacturers are designing clothing specifically for these women. Of the array of designs available, however, some usually can be chosen or modified to accommodate the special needs and body changes that occur with aging (see Appendix). The elderly woman can be comfortable and attractive.

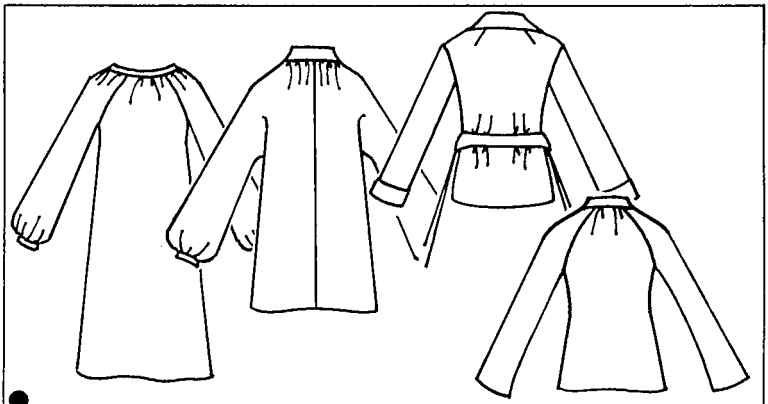
Accommodating Designs

Any woman will find that some designs will accommodate her figure better than others. The following details are presented because of the potential of each to accommodate a specific body structure or contour which is generally characteristic of elderly women. Each woman needs to analyze her figure to determine which design details would be best for her.

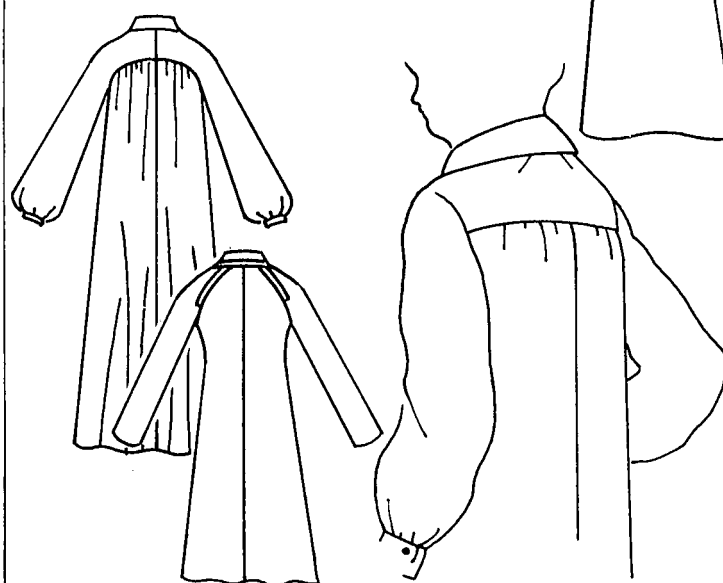
The following designs were chosen to accommodate possible changes in the skeletal alignment, in the location and prominence of body contours, and in the amount and distribution of weight. Changes related to coloring, comfort, body agility, manual dexterity and strength should also be considered. These considerations can be equally important to aging men.

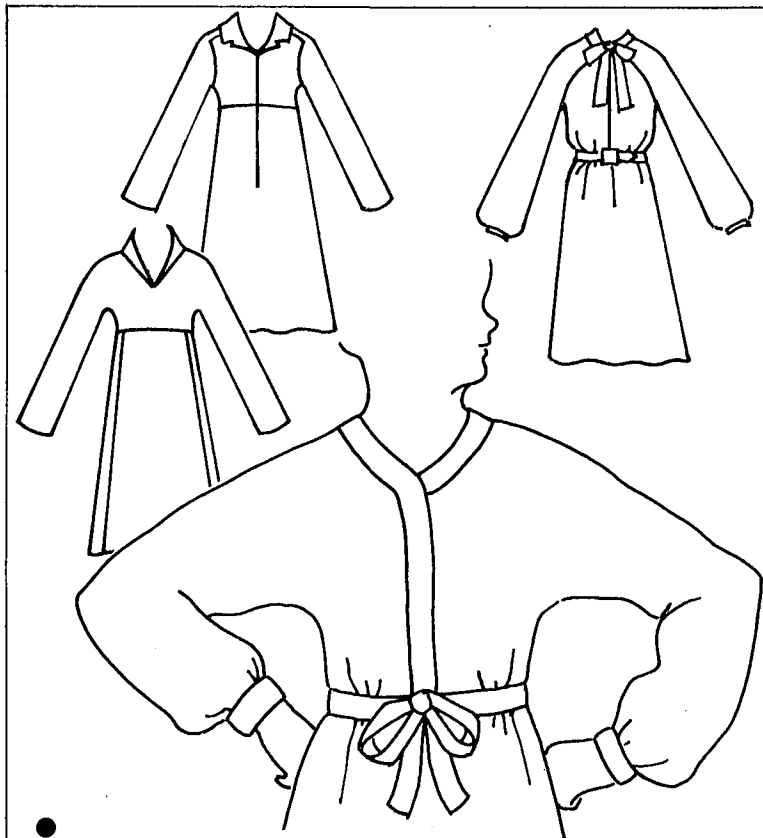


● Neck fullness and a forward head position are accommodated by necklines which do not fit snugly around the neck.

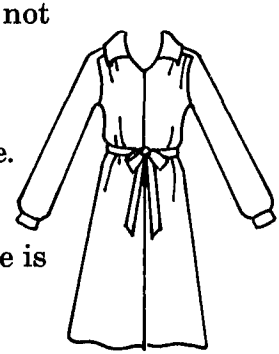


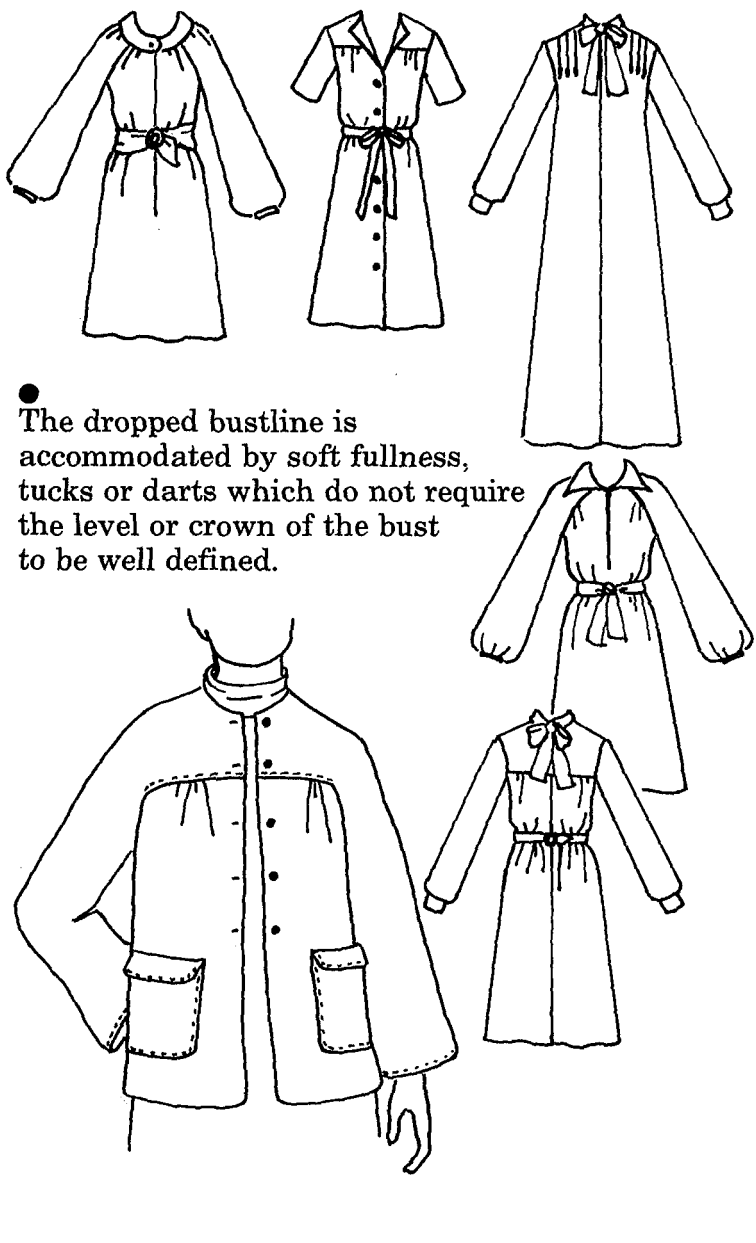
- A prominent back shoulder region may need garments which provide extra length, width and shaping. Darts, soft fullness, and the diagonal seams of raglan sleeves will help accommodate a rounded back, forward shoulders, and/or "dowager's hump."





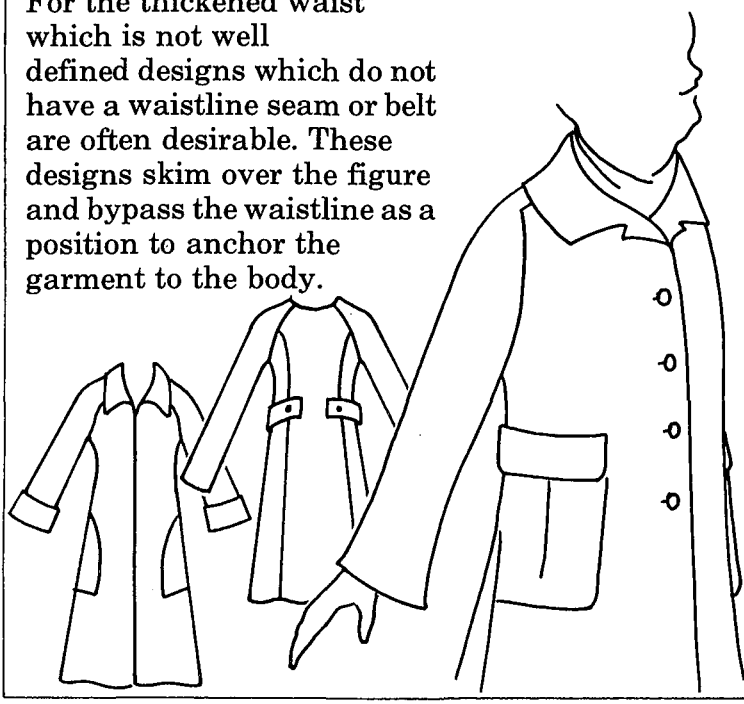
● When the tip of the shoulder is not well-defined or easily located, a sleeve design which is not anchored at this point by an armscye seam is often desirable. Such designs include raglan, dolman, kimono, and epaulet sleeves. If a regular set-in sleeve is used, placement of the armscye seam in relation to the tip of the shoulder is important.



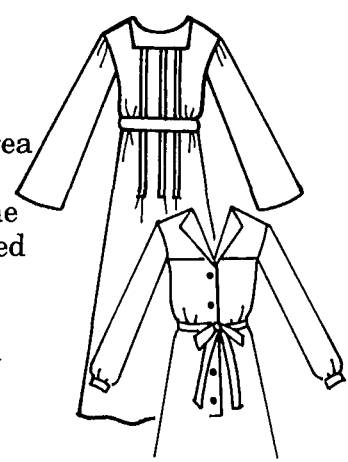


● The dropped bustline is accommodated by soft fullness, tucks or darts which do not require the level or crown of the bust to be well defined.

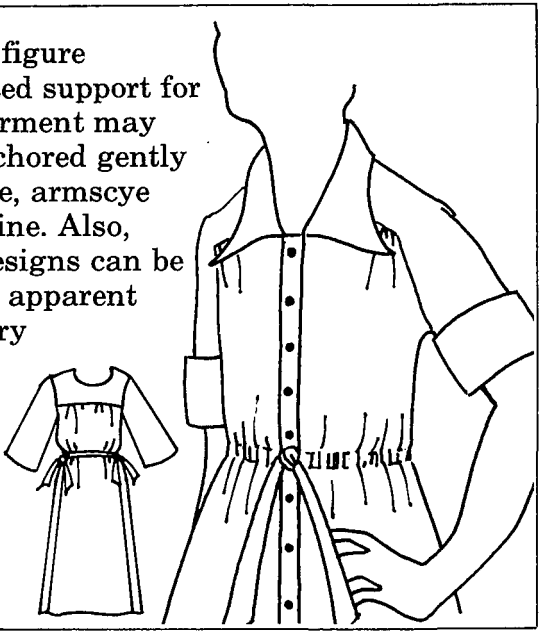
- For the thickened waist which is not well defined designs which do not have a waistline seam or belt are often desirable. These designs skim over the figure and bypass the waistline as a position to anchor the garment to the body.

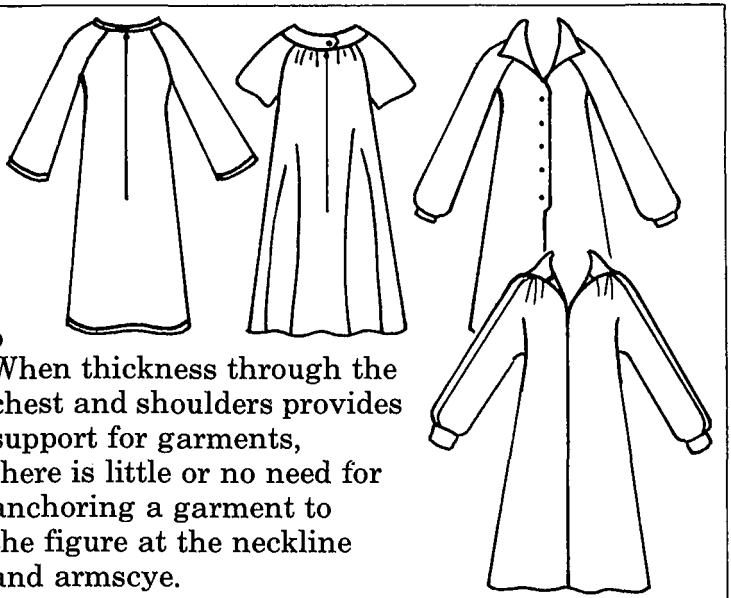


- The hollow chest requires very little or no shaping. A reduction in length in the front chest area may be needed. Whether garments are sewn at home or altered by an experienced seamstress, a yoke seam can provide an opportune place to shorten the front chest area.



- Since the thin figure provides limited support for clothing, a garment may need to be anchored gently at the neckline, armscye and/or waistline. Also, fabrics and designs can be chosen to add apparent bulk to the very thin figure.

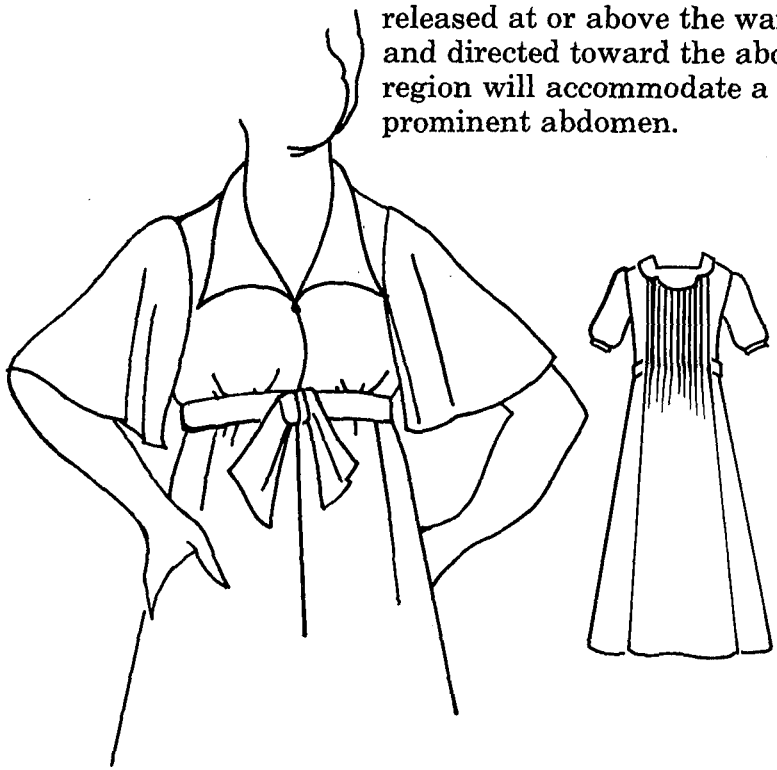


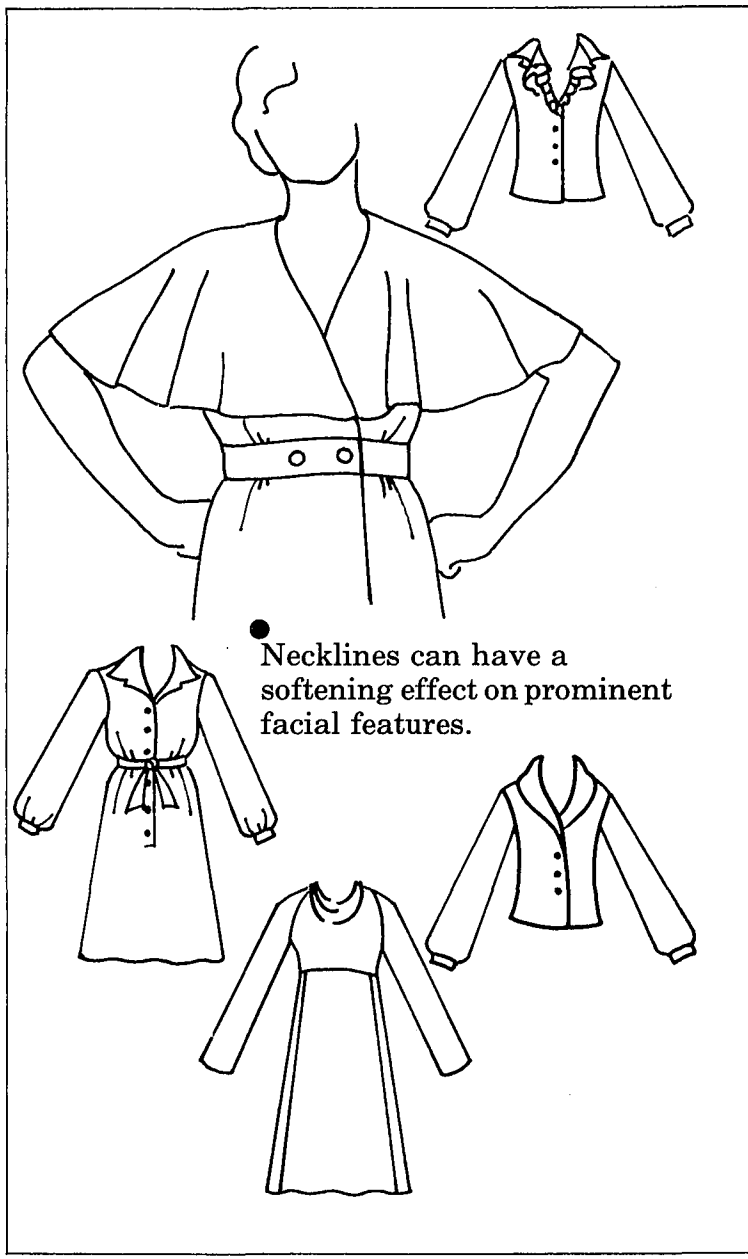


- When thickness through the chest and shoulders provides support for garments, there is little or no need for anchoring a garment to the figure at the neckline and armscye.

- Where a prominent abdomen has pushed the level of the natural waistline upward, the waistline of the garment may need to be higher than common, especially across the front of the figure.

- Soft fullness (tucks or gathers) released at or above the waistline and directed toward the abdominal region will accommodate a prominent abdomen.





● Necklines can have a softening effect on prominent facial features.

- Garments can cover major portions of the arms and legs which may have lost some of their shapliness.

- The flattened derriere needs very little shaping in the back skirt section. The length required in the back, from lower hip level to waist, may be relatively short.

- Extra sleeve width may be needed to accommodate a full upper arm, especially for the prominent thickening associated with the effects of breast surgery.

Color

Colors of clothing can be chosen to enhance and complement grayed hair, as well as to reflect or complement the desired coloring of cheeks and eyes. Gray, rose, blue, lavender, and other muted colors of the middle values are usually quite pleasing. Since any person's coloring is highly individual, the colors which are most complimentary are best determined by observing the effect of various colors of fabrics held near the face.

Comfort

Temperature Control

Elderly people usually are quite sensitive to heat and cold and, thus, require clothing which provides protection from the sun and heat during hot seasons, and clothing which is warmer than average during the winter months. Garments which shield the body from the sun, absorb perspiration, and allow air circulation are most comfortable for hot summertime wear. For the winter months garments which provide warmth without weight are usually recommended, as well as pants and long sleeves which provide protection against chilling.

Skin Sensitivity

Fabrics, soaps and other substances may be increasingly irritating to the skin of the elderly woman, even though these substances have not been irritants in the past. Because of this increased sensitivity, fabrics and construction features need to be chosen with care. For example, smooth, soft, absorbent fabrics are usually most comfortable, and some fasteners or other garment components, may need to be shielded to prevent direct contact with the skin.

Agility, Manual Dexterity and Strength

Because elderly people usually have increased difficulty in leg, arm and hand movements, garments should be designed for ease of dressing and undressing, with long openings and uncomplicated fasteners.

The armscye seam of a set-in sleeve may be somewhat restrictive; therefore, the various types of "cut-on" sleeves (raglan, dolman, kimono and epaulet) might be chosen. Other design features which reduce effort in dressing are:

- Full-length front openings
- Large zipper tabs that are easily grasped
- Touch closures permitting simple contact and separation of parts to close and open a placket
- Larger than average buttons which are easily grasped
- Adequately large buttonholes through which buttons slip easily.

These are a few of many design features which can simplify dressing activities. A little imagination, ingenuity and creativity may be all that is needed to find a solution to a special clothing problem.

To the person with limited dexterity and agility or strength, ease-of-care garments are important. Some fabrics require very little care to maintain a fresh, neat appearance. Fabrics with small, allover prints and surface texture do not show soil, spots or stains readily. Fabrics which hold a press well can look fresh for more than one wearing. If fabrics, garment components and construction are carefully chosen, the garment may launder very easily and may need little or no pressing. It should be noted that garments which require minimal care and are designed for ease of dressing can help prolong the time that elderly persons can maintain their independence.

Conclusion

Many elderly people live vital, productive lives. Being well-dressed and comfortable can be very important. Clothing can be especially important to the elderly person who wants to look and feel good. Clothing can help—provided the garment accommodates the physical attributes and needs of the wearer, and provided it contributes to the wearer's ability to manage any clothing related activity. Clothing which fulfills the needs of the elderly person requires thoughtful planning and selection, but the rewards are well worth the effort and time involved.

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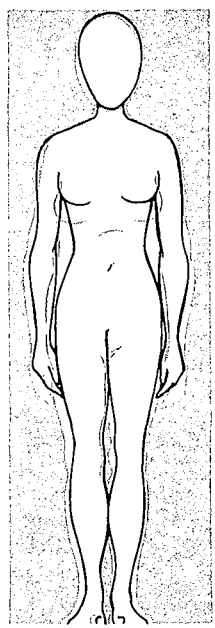
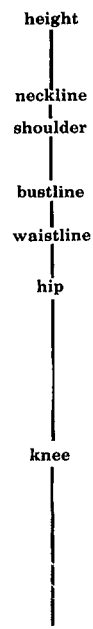


Figure 1



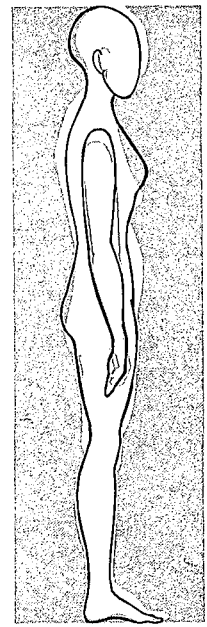


Figure 2

APPENDIX

BODY CHANGES

Drawings of the female figure illustrating the body changes which generally occur during aging (Figs. 1 & 2) indicate the following:

Height A reduction in height (as much as 5 inches) is caused by a progressive bending of the spine and a reduction of cartilage in the spinal column.

Head and Neck As the head bows, it is carried slightly forward of the usual position in erect posture. An increase in the size of the neck is often associated with the development of a double chin.

Back and Shoulders A rounding of back and shoulders is often accompanied by the development of a "dowager's hump."

Chest An increased hollowness of the chest becomes most apparent when there is a stooping of shoulders and a loss of weight.

Shoulder Tip The tip of the shoulder which is not well defined, may be increasingly difficult to locate, especially when a thickening and dropping of the shoulders occurs.

Bustline With a loss of firmness and a dropping of the bustline the crown of the bust is not well defined.

Waist With a gain in weight the waistline generally becomes thick and increasingly difficult to locate. Abdominal prominence may push the waistline upward.

Abdomen The abdomen generally becomes increasingly prominent, especially if weight is gained.

Buttocks A flattening of the derriere occurs with a loss of firmness of the buttocks.

Weight Although the elderly woman may experience a loss in weight and become very thin, she may experience a gain in weight as she becomes increasingly sedentary. Such weight gain is usually accompanied by a general thickening through the hips, thighs, waist, chest, shoulders and upper arms. Thickening of the upper arm may be quite prominent when the woman has had breast surgery.

Muscle Tone The loss of muscle tone associated with aging can cause a relaxation of body tissues, a reduction in their firmness and, consequently, a loss of shapliness of arms and legs.

Facial Contour Changes in the contour of the face include an increase in prominence of the cheekbones, nose, ears and lips. A decrease in the amount of fat reduces cushioning around the eyes and may also result in the formation of hollow places in the temples and cheeks.

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