

Boom & bust

ERIKA WOODS, SUNDAY LIFE

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Mad Men star Christina Hendricks is famous for her voluptuous figure. Photo: Getty

Women's breasts are larger than ever - and it's not due to implants. As stars like Christina Hendricks flaunt their curves, Erika Woods investigates a phenomenon of va-va-voom proportions.

Many women may have long suspected it, just as many men have secretly hoped for it. But it's official: women's breasts, and particularly those of younger women, are getting bigger. While implants have been putting that little extra va-va-voom into some busts, mostly it's a phenomenon that has occurred naturally in women, and exponentially so over the past 50 years. In fact, their cup size has tripled.

In 1960, the average bra size in Australia was 10B. Ten years ago, it was 12B. Today, it's 14C. "It's six to seven sizes up in a comparatively few number of years," says Sally Berkeley, the general manager of bra company Berlei, which next month launches a new super-sized range of cups, up to an H, to add to the traditional A-to-E dimensions. Rival Eveden now has a K cup, while Triumph is up to a G and is trialling a new cup size, J, for the next season.

"Twenty years ago, women couldn't buy this sort of fashion product with support in these sizes," says Triumph spokesperson Alana Jones. "But we've been getting so many requests from consumers, and we've now even got a sports bra coming out in a J cup."



Model Lara Stone is naturally full-busted. Photo: Getty

"Our team has undertaken international research and found that British women are also now five centimetres taller and have hips four centimetres larger than they had in the 1950s, while, instead of being size 12, they're edging towards size 16. We'd



expect that to be similar to here."

Editor of men's magazine FHM Guy Mosel says it's hard to ignore. "I certainly have noticed that women's bodies are now very different to how they were 10 years ago," he says. "Even women with skinny bodies seem to have over-developed breasts, which isn't a shape that used to exist at all."

So how exactly has this change in women's natural bust measurements come about? Experts suggest that everything from the food we're eating to the plastic bottles we're drinking from might be to blame.

But, judging from the bra companies' sales, as well as anecdotes from women themselves, no one is in any doubt that we're in the middle of a breast-size revolution. Fashion store assistant Louise Matthews, for instance, herself a size 10CC, regularly serves women of average weight with large busts. "I think women's shapes are changing," she says. "Obviously, we're seeing a lot more women now who are bigger all over, but we also have women who are slim but have big boobs - like me."

The first theory is perhaps the most obvious. Women today are much better nourished than they were 50 years ago, eating more protein and fresh fruit and vegetables and having more variety in their food. Although we eat slightly less beef and a lot less lamb than we did in the 1960s, according to the CSIRO, we're eating two to four times more pork and chicken per person, consuming a total of 290 grams of meat per person, per day. With such serious building blocks at hand, it's little surprise that we're usually taller than our mothers and have larger hips and bigger breasts.

Says dietitian Dr Jenny O'Dea, associate professor in nutrition and health education at the University of Sydney, "People are simply getting bigger, shapelier and often healthier at the same time. The average size [for women] is now 14, and that's considered to be a healthy, active weight."

You can, however, have too much of a good thing, and many of us sadly do. Another of the major reasons suggested for women becoming bigger up top is that they're bigger everywhere else. A 2007 statistic from the World Health Organisation states that 67.4 per cent of Australians are overweight, giving us a ranking of third out of the major English-speaking countries, behind New Zealand and the United States. Moreover, the National Health Survey in 2005 found that 39 per cent of Australian women were overweight.

"There has been a marked rise in obesity among Australians," says Dr Kristy Brown of the physiology department at Melbourne's Prince Henry's Institute, who is studying the links between obesity and breast cancer. "There is a link between the weight of breasts and the risk of breast cancer."

Another important factor in the increasing size of breasts could be the fact that puberty is often starting much earlier in girls, regularly at about 10 years of age. Monash University women's health specialist Professor Susan Davis says this translates into an average of 44 years of oestrogen production before menopause finally kicks in at about 54. In addition, women are having children later - or not at all - which is also having an effect on our oestrogen levels.

"Something's happening, and we're all noticing larger breasts, even for young, slender women, but there's still no quality research being done on it," Davis says.

The increasing levels of oestrogen in women's bodies are also being supplemented by what goes on around us, believes Davis: as a result of chemicals in our food - with some producers using oestrogen as a growth hormone to fatten up animals more quickly - in our medications and in our environment. "We're also ingesting chemicals in the environment from industry all the time," she says, referring to pollutants, pesticides and herbicides in food.

Many consumers still believe Australian commercially produced poultry are fed hormones and steroids, but this no longer happens, according to the Australian Chicken Meat Federation. Chickens these days are bigger only because of the way they're bred and fed.

But one of the major sources of oestrogens in the environment that can play havoc with hormone production is the humble plastic bottle. Many of these bottles contain the chemical Bisphenol A (BPA) - a compound used in the production of plastics that damages the endocrine system, probably as it has a similar structure to human oestrogen. Concern has mounted about BPA content in babies' bottles and major retailers in Australia have begun phasing out bottles containing BPA, as has already happened in the US, Canada and some European countries.

Then there's the contraceptive pill. Professor Mark McLean, president of the Endocrine Society of Australia and a professor of medicine at the University of Western Sydney, says lifelong exposure to the pill could also be a factor. "We know oestrogen stimulates breast ducts and causes tissue to proliferate," he says. "The whole reason breasts develop at the start of puberty is [because] that's when oestrogen starts to kick in. Anyone on the pill is then being exposed to more."

Another, somewhat less alarming, explanation could be that many women simply feel more confident about embracing, and celebrating, bigger boobs. With bras in larger cup sizes now becoming available in sexy, pretty styles - instead of the old beige Nanna versions - they're far happier about showing off their new curves. Voluptuous singer Kate Ceberano, 43, who is the ambassador of new Berlei range Curves, agrees. "I feel liberated now," she says. "I think the majority of women are now more ready to be themselves."

But the promotion of bigger breasts is not limited to lingerie designers. In popular culture and fashion, it seems big is being embraced wholeheartedly. Corsets, from the likes of Dior and Givenchy, are becoming commonplace, while earlier this year, Louis Vuitton had curvy models strutting down the runway wearing full-skirted dresses in a style that might be described as "pro balconette". It's a far cry from the "heroin chic" that was so prevalent in the early '90s.

While bigger breasts have long been a staple of the entertainment industry - think '50s icons Jayne Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe and even '80s pin-up Samantha Fox - it appears that there is a renewed requirement for natural, as opposed to surgically enhanced, assets.

Mad Men's Christina Hendricks, who was named the sexiest woman alive by Esquire magazine last year, said recently that she's finally being offered designer clothes that fit for red-carpet events: "They've been incredibly generous," she gushed, "making really beautiful things." In March, Hendricks had a Barbie doll made in her likeness and has blazed a trail for well-endowed women. Ditto model Lara Stone, whom Interview magazine referred to in April as "the most in-demand model in the business right now" and who flaunts a C cup.

UK television fashionistas Trinny and Susannah have helped educate a whole generation of women on the importance of being properly anchored. Yet we still have a way to go. Industry experts estimate that up to two in every three women wear the wrong bra size, usually because they're shy about being fitted properly, or have been fitted once and don't realise by how much their size can fluctuate. "We now know that the support in our bra comes from the firmness around the body, and if we've been wearing a bra that is too loose around the body, then reducing the back size naturally increases the cup size," says Kerryn Sawyer, lingerie buyer for Myer. "Correct fitting is definitely seeing cup sizes increase."

The consequences of badly fitting bras can range from indents in the shoulders one centimetre deep to neck and nerve damage, back pain and headaches. Yet few of us update our bras often enough - it should be at least yearly. However, a recycling program to send used bras to the less-developed world, being launched in October, might help.

Bra sizes come from two measurements: the torso under the breasts, and around the fullest part of the breasts for the cup size. Most women now have both a bigger back and fuller breasts, says Berlei's Sally Berkeley. With the average breast weighing about half a kilo, and making up four to five per cent of our body fat, or one per cent of our total body weight, that's not insignificant.

A whole science has grown up around supporting and protecting bigger breasts, particularly for those women wanting to undertake vigorous exercise. Running makes the breasts sway in a figure eight, while cycling causes an up-and-down movement; a 16D pair move as much as 27 centimetres. Wollongong University sports physiotherapist Deirdre McGhee is studying the biomechanics of breast movement in order to improve bra design.

If a future of big-busted women is inevitable, it's important that it's also comfortable - and desirable. "It's a great time to be a bigger-busted woman," says Darrienne Donnelly, owner of Big Gal Models, who is being overrun with curvier women wanting to flaunt their assets. "I now have lots of gorgeous girls who're a size 10 or 12, and who have a natural 12DD bust. That used to be really uncommon. But now they all have bigger bust measurements - and bigger feet, strangely - and they have so much more confidence and feel empowered. It's wonderful to see."

All things great and small

While the number of women seeking breast enlargements continues to grow, there's an increasing number of women now seeking surgical breast reductions. "I'm seeing a lot of young girls these days who are very heavy," says cosmetic surgeon Peter Haertsch. "They all suffer the same group of symptoms: sore back, shoulders and neck, headaches and itching under the breast from the heat."

The number of breast-reduction procedures Haertsch is performing has doubled in the past 10 to 15 years, he estimates. And that's not the only change. Thirty years ago, the average reduction was 400 to 600 grams of tissue per breast. Now it's 800 grams-plus, Haertsch says. "I've done breasts where I've had to take 1.5 kilograms from each side."

Breast reductions usually cost between \$10,000 and \$12,500, while augmentations are \$9,000 to \$13,500. Interestingly, the women seeking enlargements now are asking for bigger implants, with the size requested doubling from an average of 180cc 30 years ago to about 300cc now, says Haertsch.

Dr Steve Merten, chair of the New South Wales chapter of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, agrees that the average implant being requested has got bigger, although not markedly so. "Occasionally, a patient will go to the extreme but the average is not excessively bigger."

The experience of Fine Cosmetic Surgery's Dr Tony Prochazka is that considerably larger implants are the fashion. "I've always tried to focus on a really natural look, something that's elegant rather than cartoonish, but there's definitely now a trend towards wanting really quite large breasts, verging on unnatural, straying into the realm of parody, mostly among younger girls," he says.

Comments

27 comments

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»Hooray - perhaps now stores will start stocking clothes to fit us curvy girls, and something other than the usual choice between 3 awful 'granny bras' in the entire store«

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10E naturally | Sydney - July 19, 2010, 1:31PM

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»I own a lingerie store in Crows Nest and have been fitting bras for over 30 years. I sell more G cups than B cups. The shape of breasts has also changed - breast tissue is starting further under the arms - hence the larger cup sizes - not just the volume size. However I stock over 60 bra sizes and I have a customer for every size so there are still plenty of A cups girls out there. One thing is for sure - ALL women are beautiful no matter what shape or size they come in!«

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Pauline | Crows Nest - July 19, 2010, 1:26PM

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»This subject is just on of my biggest headaches! I have had trouble finding bras to fit me over the years, and for the past 3.5 years I've had the pleasure/pain of living in maternity bras, which to find bras that fit was an even bigger pain (literally)! I finished my teens in the late 80s a 10C, but now find myself a 12J... How did this happen? - and it's all natural, mind you! (Not that my husband is complaining!)«

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Happy 12J | Sydney - July 19, 2010, 1:58PM

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»People are bigger these days, so of course breasts will be too. I really hope it's a sign for stores to start stocking nicer bras for the bigger bust ladies.«

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Nat | Melbourne. - July 19, 2010, 1:57PM

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»I was on the bigger side, and had a reduction nearly 25 years ago, never have looked back, without question the best thing I could have done. I was only a DD but had the genetic legacy of heavy breast tissue full of cysts, I think having large breasts was a nightmare for a young girl and loathed it passionately. The pain was psychological as well as physical. «

»I am stunned, then, when I read about woman who want bigger and bigger implants, but then, I have often thought that fake large breasts look orders or magnitude better than the real, large, heavy, saggings breasts that nature provides. «

»And where that cosmetic surgeon is quoted as saying that young girls are seeking parodically large implants, I do so hope he is not putting these in for them.«

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woman | world - July 19, 2010, 1:54PM

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»They may now be catering for women with large breasts in the bra department but it hasn't yet flowed though to the other clothes. I wouldn't mind if they started improving shirts and dresses.«

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Amy - July 19, 2010, 2:11PM

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»I am a 16-18J. It is incredibly hard to find decent, supportive, pretty bras in this size, and it is not helped by companies announcing that they're going to stock what they term "bigger sizes" but in fact stop at G (pfft - nipple warmers). I have to order my bras over the tinternet (bravissimo) from the UK as I just can't find them over here for a competitive price.«

»But apart from the bra issue I have to agree with Amy - I can never find dresses that fit, I have trouble

with shirts (major gaping), jackets and even t shirts.»

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BigRedTractor | Sydney - July 19, 2010, 2:48PM

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»I hope that womens dept stores finally get the picture that clothes that are still tailored to fit a women with a 'b' cup are just outdated. Finding a nice fitted jacket when you have curves is impossible, the clothes both fit and sit poorly and are just not worth buying. If models had busts and curvy figures (rather than looking like walking coat hangers) then we might actually get clothes that fit normal people properly and look good, giving women much better confidence.»

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neen - July 19, 2010, 3:06PM

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»It's too bad that bra stores are so far behind what is actually happening with women's bodies... we need a bigger variety of sizes -from the very small to the very big. I'm a 8DD, but I have to wear a 10D because it is very hard to find 8s, and even harder to find 8DD. I'm frequently told to go to the children/tween section of department stores and just buy the training bras there, since they come in 8s... but only 8AA and 8A, no DDs in the kids department. There's also the fact that I am NOT a child, I am a small adult, why should I have to shop in the children's section?«

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Lisa - July 19, 2010, 3:23PM

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»Lisa, youve been treated poorly, go to www.bravalingerie.com.au I have purchased size 8F in pretty bras and sports bras - they even have size 6 and they are definitely for adults.»

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Kate | Melbourne - July 19, 2010, 3:46PM

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» la-la - I hear you! There are many more bras for larger sizes than smaller sizes and I am ... «
Emma

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