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Denim 101: Your guide to finding jeans that fit and flatter

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For many of us, even bathing suit shopping is preferable to trying on jeans. At least your choices are limited: one piece or two, tankini or bikini, padded or ruched top. And when was the last time you couldn't pull a swimsuit up past your thighs?

If winning the lottery seems more possible than finding a pair of jeans that fits, you're not alone.

New York-based fashion stylist Sharon Haver has grappled to find the perfect jeans for years.

"My weight fluctuates, but no matter how skinny I am, I can't wear jeans without Lycra," says the editor of FocusOnStyle.com. "I have thighs and a tush, and I can't pull them up without it."

For her, Ann Taylor's jeans, which have a bit of stretch, fit well. And for women who no longer have the body of a teen or 20-something, she suggests taking a look at jeans from NYDJ, which stands for Not Your Daughter's Jeans.

"They're built more for a woman than a girl, and our bodies do change when we age," Haver says. "It shows up most in a pair of jeans. You might still look great in a dress, but the jeans must hold you and lift you up."

A few tips from the guru:

- Invest in a tailor if you find a pair that comes close. "Even if you spend \$15 to have them tapered, think about how much time you spend in jeans."
- Get rid of those low-rise jeans if you're experiencing "muffin top." The latest trend is for jeans with a slightly higher rise, and that's a good thing for most of us, Haver says.
- Go for straight leg or trouser cut, not skinny jeans, to balance your thighs. "You want your jeans looser around the knee if you have big thighs because any jean that's tight around the knee and then flares will make thighs look bigger."
- Shoes matter, Haver says. Never wear bootleg jeans with high heels, unless you want to look older. If thighs are your problem area, wear a chunkier heel shoe or boot and a long jacket or coat. But if you have spindly legs, those "chunky" shoes are not for you. Consider slip-heeled pumps. And unless you have enviably long legs, wear jeans with a little bit of a heel, or stacked heel ankle boots, which give you a bit of a lift. Finally, if you want to wear a delicate shoe, consider capris, or roll up those jeans and show a bit of ankle.

Molly Bingaman, a personal stylist in Kansas City ([ladybirdstyling.com](#)), says her top tip is to be sure you're shopping in the correct department. If you're shorter than 5 feet, 4 inches, the petite section will be your destination, no matter how curvy your shape.

"Next, you'll need to know your body-shape, and to recognize that the goal is usually to make your legs appear as long as possible, and to balance your top and bottom halves," Bingaman says.

"Picture the hourglass shape and note that both the top and bottom halves are balanced in relation to each other. Now picture your own shape. Where do you need to add width to balance things out? Your size is not important here, it's the shape you're creating with your jeans that counts."

A few tips from Bingaman to create that sought-after look:

- If you're wider through the hips and thighs than the shoulders and bust, opt for a dark-wash denim that slims that bottom half. "A bootcut is almost always a flattering choice, but my favorite is the mini-boot cut, which creates a sleeker, straighter line on the leg."
- Are you proportionally broader on your top half than you are on your bottom? Select something in a wider leg, like a trouser-cut or wide leg variety. If you're top-heavy, a lighter wash with a wider leg will help balance things.
- If your middle is your issue, look for something with more give in the waistband, and a straight leg. A mid-rise is usually a safe bet, Bingaman says.
- So who can wear those skinny jeans, aside from teens? If you're nice and straight up and down, this is the cut for you. Accept that most of the rest of the female population will send hostile glances your way.

And if all this advice has your head spinning, Sofia Wacksman, vice president of trends for Kohl's department stores, has some soothing advice.

"When looking for the perfect pair of jeans, there are no hard and fast rules. With the breadth of denim styles available, have fun and experiment with different fits and washes until you find one you feel amazing in," Wacksman says. "A slimmer-cut leg looks great with a voluminous top or long jacket. If you love your tried and true boot cut jeans, freshen up this look with an updated wash or color."

Whether you tuck perfectly into a pair of Levis, or you've found a great pair at your favorite boutique, we offer one more bit of jeans advice: If you find some you love, stock up. Following are a few of the classic cuts:

- Grey Zipper Jeans (\$69.99, marshallsonline.com). That rise is lifting a bit, and the zippers add a bit of interest to these chic jeans.
- Mossimo Supply Co. Juniors Zipper Skinny Denim - Assorted Colors (\$22.99, target.com). These low-rise, slim cut jeans are cut for those with a lean build.
- Levi's 529 Curvy Bootcut Jeans (\$54, kohls.com). Let these classics balance your figure. A bit of a heel will help balance the look, the pros all agree.
- Dark Flare Denim (\$79.99, marshallsonline.com). A dark color is always slimming, the pros all agree.
- Merona Women's Bootcut Jeans (Curvy Fit) - Assorted Washes (\$24.99, target.com). Target jeans are custom fit for your shape. These bootcut "classic fit" jeans are made for those with a curvy figure. A little Spandex offers a bit of room to breathe.
- Rock & Republic Berlin Faded Skinny Jeans (\$88, kohls.com). The midrise cut is a good one for those with a bit of a tummy, and a touch of Spandex helps, as well. These are slim cut from hip to hem, for those with narrow hips and lean legs.

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