

Everyone knows that "good things come in small packages."

But try telling that to a 5-foot-2-inch female shopper who's just spent the day searching the mall for a pair of jeans.

Kim Williams Dahlman knows the frustration of trying on apparel that is too long or disproportionate to her body -- or styled more for a middle school student than a 40-something.

With more than 20 years experience as a petite-fashion buyer in New York and director of sales for a petite-clothing line, she is considered an expert on the subject and shares her wisdom at events around the country.

Dahlman will play host to a runway show featuring spring styles and silhouettes for petites on March 29 at the Ross Park Mall Macy's. She also will offer wardrobe tips and discuss shopping strategy for petite women.

She says the most common misconception about petite fashions is that they are designed strictly for the diminutive woman whose size is in the single digits. Petite sizing actually is based on height, not weight. Petite clothing is geared to women 5-foot-4 and shorter, regardless of whether they wear a size 2 or a size 16.

"People mistakenly perceive petite as being for small women," she says. "There are a lot of women who would get a better fit with petite sizes, but they don't realize it. There's still a lot of educating to do."

Although petite-sized women account for more than 56 percent of the female population, Dahlman says, they have a difficult time finding petite specialty stores. In her hometown of Casselberry, Fla., near Orlando, she says "there's not a single one for 100 miles. It's a real void in business."

Heather Hannan, Macy's Midwest public relations manager, says that Macy's "is dedicated to serving the fashion needs of our customers -- and this absolutely includes petites."

She says that fashion experts at the department store chain realize "that petite women want to find clothing that not only fits but accentuates their style. Our petite selection delivers a variety of wardrobe options for our customers. Whether she is a traditional, neo-traditional, contemporary or a fashion customer, Macy's has something to appeal to her in our petite department."

At speaking engagements, Dahlman says she consistently answers questions and offers advice about which styles, shapes and colors work best for petite women. Finally, she says, she decided to compile the information in a recently published book, "The Petite Handbook" (Fidelity Press, \$10.95)

The spiral-bound book includes facts about petite sizing, suggestions for choosing accessories and shoes that flatter rather than overpower a petite figure, and shopping strategies to help petite customers save time and money.

By following guidelines that are as basic as "A V-neckline makes a short body frame look longer" and "Wearing the same color from head to toe always makes a petite woman look taller," petites can make the most of their figures, the author says.

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#### Top 10 petite tips

Shop for clothing with strong vertical lines -- zip-front styles, cable-patterned knits, ribbed knits, vertical pleats and wrap or sarong styles.

Dress in monochromatic colors. Choose solid or patterned suits with jacket and skirt or pants in the same shade or pattern, or coat dresses.

Put outfits together in tonal combinations. You can appear taller by wearing one family of color -- such as shades of green -- or colors with a similar intensity, such as all pale colors.

Wear unbroken lines of color on the body. For example, match a top and a bottom in the same color or pattern, and add a layering piece such as a top or blouse in a contrasting color or pattern.

Divide the petite figure with short-over-long or long-over-short silhouettes. Pair a short tailored jacket with long pants, or a long tunic style top with a short skirt.

Choose a V-neckline or create the illusion of a V-neckline with a vest, shawl collar blouse, halter top or cardigan.

Balance the horizontal line created by a round or square neckline with something vertical. Some vertical details include pintucking, ruffles, cable stitching or a necklace or pearls.

Keep the focal point high with eye-catching details such as crochet trim, epaulettes, novelty shoulder treatments or embroidery.

Use the "Fist Rule" to determine whether a print or pattern is right for you. If the pattern is larger than your fist, the print is too big for your petite frame.

Shop for soft, fluid, lightweight fabrics. Good choices include silk, rayon, cotton, crepe, microfiber, cashmere and lightweight denim.

*Source: "The Petite Handbook" by Kim Williams Dahlman*