

Petite fashions getting tough to find

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"Average" is one of the most misused and oversimplified words, especially when it comes to fashion.

The National Center for Health Statistics says the "average" American woman is 5 feet 4 and weighs about 163 pounds. You will not find this reflected in what most clothing stores sell. The fashion industry considers that average height to be petite, a specialty category that gets its own section and stores.

As the retail industry has suffered financially, petite offerings, never a huge chunk of the market, are among those that have been cut back. The Petite Sophisticate chain closed most of its stores in 2006. (It still sells clothing on its Web site, www.petitesophisticate.com.)

[petitesophisticate.com](http://www.petitesophisticate.com).)

This has left petite women — anyone 5-4 and under, regardless of weight — struggling even more to find clothes. And if you're under 5-2, the minimum size of the fit models designers use to create their clothes, you're really out of luck. Your only option might be to find a good tailor.

Limited budgets have made it harder for petite lines to serve all their customers, says Kim Williams Dahlman, at 5-4 not only a petite customer but someone who has worked in petite fashions for more than 20 years.

Petite women who wear above size 14 have seen their options reduced in the past five years. And balancing customers' lifestyle demands has become difficult.

"Some people want more career, some people want more casual," Williams Dahlman says. "That's a challenge, to have a good mix, from career to casual, young to more mature."

Williams Dahlman, who lives in Casselberry, outside Orlando, has been a department store buyer and developed petite clothes for the Susan Bristol line. For the past 16 years, she has been an expert speaker on petite fashions for department stores. She also has written *The Petite Handbook*, which Oprah Winfrey's magazine called "a fashion bible for smaller women."

Williams Dahlman, 49, was at Macy's in Westfield Countryside mall at Clearwater this month presenting 25 petite looks for a crowd of about 90 and offering dressing tips.

The issue for some was still finding clothes. Seven looks in the show were dresses, but a woman in the audience told Williams Dahlman afterward that she can't find dresses.

Williams Dahlman agreed that's a particular problem, especially for eveningwear. And she's not sure why. "I guess dress manufacturers just operate on lower budgets," she said. "A lot of the dress manufacturers are smaller companies, and I guess they have to make decisions (about what they offer)."

The good news is that larger sportswear manufacturers are now making dresses, she said. The ones in this show all came from those makers, including Macy's INC, Style & Co. and Alfani petite lines, and Liz Claiborne Petite.

She's a fan of those lines in general, especially INC for trends and Alfani for career-wear. She also likes Jones New York for classic pieces, DKNY for jeans and casual clothes, and Anne Klein for higher-end items.

The best places to shop for petite clothes are department stores, she said, because they have the largest selections. Among specialty stores, she likes Talbot's, Ann Taylor and Banana Republic.

Petite women shouldn't limit what they buy because they think they're too short to wear certain things, Williams Dahlman said. In her book, she gives 10 rules for petites (they're listed in the accompanying box). "Because if you follow the rules . . . you can pretty much wear anything and look terrific."

And there's nothing "average" about that.

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The average petite fit model is 5 feet 2 to

5 feet 4.

A V neckline makes the body look longer.

Keep a belt in proportion: a narrow or medium width and the same color as the piece it's belting.

Wearing one color elongates the body.

Dresses can be hard to find in petite sizes. This one is from Macy's INC Petite line (\$119, bay area Macy's stores and www.macys.com).

. Fast facts

Petite dressing tips

What to wear to make a petite body — classified as 5 feet 4 and smaller, regardless of weight — look taller, from *The Petite Handbook* by Kim Williams Dahlman (available for \$10.95 at www.thepetitehandbook.com).

1. Vertical lines.
2. The same color head to toe.
3. One color family.
4. If you must contrast colors, create an unbroken line by, for instance, wearing the same color jacket and skirt with a contrasting blouse.
5. Short top and long bottom or long top and short bottom.
6. V neckline.
7. Something vertical to balance the horizontal line of a round or square neck.
8. Accessories at the neck or on the top half of clothes to draw the eye upward.
9. Fluid, lightweight fabrics
10. Small prints (the basic pattern should be no bigger than your fist).

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[Photos by JOSEPH GARNETT JR. | Times] This skirt and top are from Jones New York Petite. The print on the top's cuffs and collar help direct the eye up and give the illusion of height.