Sense and sensitivity

Finding comfortable clothes to wear can be a huge issue for people with sensory issues, as Tracey Lattimore discovers



Clothing can feel scratchy and irritating to some people

Many autistic people have sensory difficulties, one of which is touch. Some might find that certain textures aggravate or even hurt their skin, while others enjoy the feeling of weighted objects. When it comes to clothing, labels can irritate, the texture of fleeces might not be quite right, materials are itchy and seams can cause discomfort.

"I can't wear anything 'scratchy', so that includes wools and tweeds – I even have to be careful with stiff linens," says Mike, National Autistic Society member. "I tend to wear cotton clothes, such as shirts and trousers. My main exceptions are some of the suits sold by M&S, which are predominately made of a polyester material and are, therefore, smooth to the skin."

Feeling restless

Not everyone has the same physical reaction to clothes and textures. Some experience a crawling sensation over their bodies, which can even extend to the mouth, hands and feet. It can be distracting at best, but at worst can make them feel so restless that they're unable to do anything. Others feel the need to engross themselves in an activity to take their mind off it.

Parents of children with sensory difficulties often find their child will wear the same clothes over and over again – mainly because these are the ones in which they feel most comfortable, but also because this has something to do with routine.

"My daughter, Kirsty, constantly wears the same grey fleece," says Meta Auden, who set up Spectra Sensory Clothing as a result of her daughter's sensory sensitivity. "So I bought her a fleece in a different colour. I don't wear fleeces, and I did not realise that the inside of every fleece was different; some she could

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wear, and some not. She never told me that the wardrobe full of clothes that I had bought for her would never be worn. Knowing the clothes she didn't like was a real benefit, but did not help much in finding things she would like. So I decided that it was about time there was an autism-friendly clothing range."

Adults with sensory issues usually get into a pattern of finding what works for them, and knowing the textures or fabrics to avoid.

"When buying clothes, I usually run the back of my hand across the material to test its 'scratchiness'. If it is too rough, then I won't buy it. If in doubt, I try it on first," says Mike. "I can wear jackets made of tweed or wool, as they aren't directly next to my skin, but if I have to wear a wool suit, then I also have to wear cotton long johns to keep the suit material away from my legs.

"Luckily, my employer has a smart/casual dress policy, which allows me to wear cotton chinos. At home, I wear cotton shirts, polo shirts and jeans."

School uniform can often be a problem for



Meta Auden



Meta's daughter Kirsty

"Greens remind me of the sea and trees"

National Autistic Society member Andrea explains what fabrics and colours work best for her

"The clothing most comfortable for me is made from cotton, with some stretch or give, but not too nylon or elastic. I don't like the feel of wool or nylon. I also don't like waistbands or belts, as these can irritate my skin, and make me feel trapped.

"In terms of colours, I like certain light greys. I have two casual, slightly stretchy, grey lounge suits – they are warm but lightweight, and I wear them a lot, both indoors and out. The tops have a hood, which can be useful and protective.

"I like wearing navy, as it can look smart without being intrusive, while some greens – and colours on the blue/green spectrum – can be calming. They remind me of the sea and trees.

"Orange can be a refreshing colour, but I'm not good with red – it can be a very disturbing colour for me. I'm also not keen on white, bright blue or acid greens. Black is OK at times, and purple occasionally."

What does it feel like?

Below are some of the effects a person with touch sensitivity might experience:

UNDERSENSITIVE

- Holds others tightly
- Has a high pain threshold
- May be unable to feel food in the mouth
- May self-harm
- Enjoys heavy objects such as weighted blankets on top of them
- Smears substances such as paint and faeces as enjoys the texture
- Chews on things, including clothing and inedible objects

OVERSENSITIVE

- Touch can be painful and uncomfortable
- Dislikes having anything on hands or feet
- Difficulties brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive
- May find many food textures uncomfortable
- Only tolerates certain types of clothing or textures

children, as there's not a huge amount of choice when it comes to fabrics in school colours, while seams and labels can be irritating or even intolerable. However, various online retailers offer solutions that may help - see box, right.

What to wear

So what clothing options are there for children and adults with sensory issues? Spectra Sensory Clothing has a range of clothing, from school uniforms made with soft fabrics, flat seams and minimal buttons to loose-fitting t-shirts, seamless socks and tights. It features tops that can be worn either way round, with no back or front, while labels are hidden in pockets or are easily removable. There's also a variety of tieless shoelaces for both adults and children, designed for those who find lacing up hard. And when it comes to Christmas wear, the company has a range of autism-friendly festive jumpers that are not scratchy, and that use a heat press so the wearer can't feel the motif on the front through the jumper.

M&S has an easy-dressing range for children that need extra help, such as pieces that are easy to get on and are gentle on sensitive skin. The school uniform features shirts with Velcro fastenings to help children dress within seconds, and has no fiddly zips or buttons. Itchy labels have been removed, too.

JettProof is another company founded by parents of an autistic child, which sells underwear for special-needs children and adults. It features a range of pieces - such as sensory vests, seamless socks, shorts and leggings - that can be worn under regular clothes and are made from light, breathable, sensory fabric. According to the founders, children benefit from the 'calming' underwear, which can be worn all year round and provides sensory compression to the muscles.

Other options that people can find useful are weighted fleeces and gilets. The extra weight can have a calming effect on the body's proprioceptive system (proprioception is the sense of self-movement and body position) and they can help prevent children from fidgeting in the classroom. Some people also use them to help prevent meltdowns when they are subjected to a lot of sensory input.

Find out more

Find out more: **www.autism.org.uk/sensory**

You can search for and buy sensory clothing from these companies online:

www.marksandspencer.com/l/kids/easy-dressing

www.spectrasensoryclothing.co.uk/autistic-clothing

www.jettproof.co.uk