

The right to bare arms

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Among Michelle Obama's many achievements, the state of her arms hardly seems significant. Yet the media buzz surrounding those toned biceps - applauding as her husband addressed Congress, or appearing in a shoulder-exposing Michael Kors shift for her White House portrait - indicate otherwise.

Impractical during winter months, the first lady's penchant for sleeveless dressing has more relevance now that summer has arrived. And labels like Liz Claiborne and Max Azria are offering a surfeit of styles that flatter from the waist up.

But for some women, there's never a right time to bare arms. They need to get over it, Toronto image consultant Anne Sowden says. "Your arms are only as bad as you think they are; they're never as bad to everyone else."

You need not have Madonna's muscles or Kelly Ripa's ripped physique to sport cap sleeve tees, wide-strapped tanks and dresses with asymmetrical necklines. Small styling tricks can draw attention away from less-than-lean triceps (let's not even entertain that term "bat wings").

Sowden believes that short sleeves are often more unforgiving than sleeveless styles, drawing attention to fleshy bits. But the diagonal line of a cap sleeve is preferable to the horizontal line created by a regular T-shirt sleeve, she says. "If you're full-busted, the bottom of the sleeve goes right across the bust and all you see is bust. A cap sleeve makes arms look leaner and longer."

Another good strategy is accentuating the neckline, face and shoulders. "Jewellery always does it," says Sowden, who recommends a statement necklace or earrings.

The décolletage will distract the eye from the deltoids (or lack thereof). But Sowden stresses that older women need to be honest about whether it's still appropriate to be showing cleavage.

In any case, a well-fitted bra won't change the shape of your arms, but it will improve posture, which has a slimming effect. But there's a fine line between supportive and so tight it results in bulges.

Fashion expert Sandra Pittana, a regular contributor to the lifestyle program *Cityline*, says a little tan goes a long way. No tan? Try a body lotion with shimmer or dust iridescent powder on your shoulders to create the illusion of definition.

"It's no different than when you are tired and then you get some colour in your face," she says. "You're going to look a bit healthier. And at least we can all be comforted by knowing we need our vitamin D."

Armed for summer

According to Amy Brown, owner of Pilates for Life studio in Toronto, the best arm toner is a Pilates push-up, which works the triceps by keeping arms aligned with the sides. Beginners can do a standing version, placing hands against a wall at armpit level and pushing off. The intermediate version is done on the floor, from the knees. "Count to four as you're coming up and lowering down," Brown says.

Weighted balls (two to three pounds) or water bottles can stand in for bigger weights. With arms straight and palms toward the body, raise weights in front until arms are parallel to the ground or sideways up to shoulder height.

Compound exercises such as overhead presses will burn calories and work multiple muscle groups, Toronto personal trainer Sean Orr says. Lifting detergent containers above your head targets the shoulders, back and chest. A bonus, "When you stand up straight with your chest up, you don't even have to do anything and you'll look better."

Exercise alone won't take you from flab to fab. Orr says a diet of 20 grams of lean protein three times a day, vegetables, fruits and whole grains will help create more defined upper arms.