

Rid your purse of excess baggage

Roxanne Johnson figures she's carried a purse regularly since she was in junior high. She thinks, back then, her tote housed a wallet, a house key and maybe a hairbrush. "I wasn't wearing lipstick yet," says the Fargo resident. But through the years, Johnson's handbag has grown in size and function.

By: [Tammy Swift](#), INFORUM

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She thinks, back then, her tote housed a wallet, a house key and maybe a hairbrush. "I wasn't wearing lipstick yet," says the Fargo resident.

But through the years, Johnson's handbag has grown in size and function. After a minimalist period in which Johnson strived to carry the smallest, most Spartanly appointed reticule possible, she began tossing everything from flash drives and mail to nail polish into her bag.

"It's kind of a catch-all," says Johnson, a water-treatment specialist with NDSU Extension Service. "In case I need something, it might be in there."

Johnson recently brought her bag to a purse-organizing party in south Moorhead. Guests weighed their purses before and after a de-cluttering session, picked up purse-purging tips from professional organizer Melissa Schmalenberger, ordered organizing products and unearthed everything from 3-D glasses to kids' action figures in their cavernous clutches.

In the process, the women discovered they had a lot in common. Their purses reflected full, hectic lives, in which they juggled the multiple roles of moms, wives, students, executives, artists and caregivers.

Brook A. Townley, owner of Origin Chiropractic in Fargo, says she sees women's ever-expanding roles exemplified

- [What's in your purse?](#)



Photo illustration by Dave Wallis / The Forum

- [Organizing a purse, step 1](#)



As instructed during a recent purse-organizing party, Roxanne M. Johnson dumps out the contents of her purse. Tammy Swift / The Forum

- [Organizing a purse, step 2](#)



Johnson and other party guests are then told to group together like items from their purses. Tammy Swift / The Forum

- [Organizing a purse, step 3](#)



A purse organizer, or even a few inexpensive zippered bags, can make it easier to find what you need – and to transfer essential items to another handbag. Tammy Swift / The Forum

by their ever-growing baggage. “People are trying to address all parts of their daily life in one bag. You used to carry a wallet and maybe a brush and some lipstick. Now there are phones, laptops, things for the kids. ... Our multitasking has carried over into our purses.”

Kelley Styring writes in her book, [“In Your Purse: Archaeology of the American Handbag,”](#) (AuthorHouse, 2007): “Soon, as responsibility builds, a young woman learns to drive or gets her first job, and the role of the purse expands. ... She becomes responsible for herself and the purse is a vital supporting tool. What emerges is a strong, almost compulsive need to be prepared for any situation that might occur. The stronger this need, the more items and categories represented in the bag.”

But our transition from pampered hausfrau to perennially prepared pack mule has its price. Schmalenberger says about 95 percent of all U.S. women regularly carry a purse. Many of those 88 million females have become handbag hoarders, lugging around everything from first-aid kits to bottle openers to the kids’ snacks in oversized bags.

Some women’s purses tip the scales at 10 pounds (the equivalent to a small-ish bowling ball), even though the American Chiropractic Association recommends handbags weigh less than 3.

Local chiropractor Townley says she’s seen many of the effects of the Amazing Colossal Purse.

A woman who routinely carries a heavy bag is at risk for injuries to the shoulder (especially to the rotator cuff), upper back and neck. Long-term stress can cause fatigue in the muscles that support these areas, resulting in muscle spasms and possible alignment problems down the road, Townley says. This muscle strain also can predispose you to injuries when you try other activities, such as shoveling snow or even reaching into your backseat to retrieve that ponderous purse.

Townley counsels her patients to switch from huge shoulder bags to smaller satchels that can be carried by hand or on the forearm.

Lighten up

Women also need to lighten the load.

A purse typically doesn’t need more than the following items: a wallet, credit cards, identification, a cell phone, sunglasses and case, Blackberry, reading glasses and medication.

You might also add items such as a small cosmetics case, bandages, aspirin, tissues, anti-bacterial wipes and – if you have kids – emergency snacks and a small toy.

Fargo-based organizers – including Schmalenberger of MS. Simplicity and Deb Williams of Ducks in a Row Organizing – offer tips on how to downsize to the most essential items.

- **Commit to a once-a-week cleaning.** It will relieve stress, keep the job from getting too daunting and even save money. Schmalenberger says you will find important lost receipts for items that need to be returned, warranties for appliances and loose cash.
- **Purge the purse.** The first step is to dump out the bag, shaking it over a garbage can to get rid of crumbs and dirt.
- **Do a quick sort.** Sort all garbage into one pile, all items that don't belong in the purse in another and all items that do go back in the purse in yet another.
- **Group like items together.** Sort according to function. Most women will find their purse contents fit into similar categories, such as financial items, snacks, first-aid, medication, electronics and cosmetics. (Consider downsizing from full-size brushes or cosmetics bottles to folding brushes and small, leak-proof bottles.)
- **Embrace the rule of one.** One way to curb purse overload is to get rid of multiples, Schmalenberger says. Do you really need more than one ChapStick? Do you lug around a lot of credit cards and rewards cards you never use? (Williams points out you often don't even need rewards cards; merchants can look up your name if you give them your phone number.) Are you lugging around \$12 in spare change? (That can pack on purse poundage quickly.) Schmalenberger recommends keeping a jar or dish handy where you can dump extra change nightly.
- **Contain yourself.** It's much easier to find what you need if each category is stowed in a separate bag. There are organizational products for corralling everything from business cards to receipts. But in a pinch, something as simple as color-coded, zippered bags or resealable plastic bags will do the trick. When restocking your purse, remember to put items you use most in the most accessible place in your purse, Schmalenberger says. If your purse doesn't have a cell-phone pocket, consider an external phone pouch clipped to the bag strap.
- **Restrain receipts.** Left unattended, receipts will reproduce like rabbits – especially if you frequently use credit and debit cards. If you're saving them to reconcile with your checkbook, the best spot for them is a work station at home, Williams says. If the receipt is for items purchased, you should know in a week or so whether you need to keep it. She recommends keeping receipts in an inexpensive plastic envelope with the flap bent backward so it's an open pouch. They'll be protected and easier to find.
- **Cut out Kleenex.** One of the most unpleasant staples of the busy woman's purse is the prospect of sorting through crumpled, used tissues. Williams counters that by carrying a couple of handkerchiefs. "It's way more elegant than pulling out a wadded-up Kleenex," she says.

You also may want to reassess the type of purse you carry. A smaller purse with many compartments is more organized and functional than a giant hobo bag. "I have challenged myself to stick to a smaller purse," Williams says. "Most of us are way more prepared than we need to be. I don't think a lack of preparation is as much of a problem as is being able to find what you need."

Purse-cetera: Facts, tips about carrying a clutch

- The typical woman carries two to three purses on a regular basis.
- Women have been carrying containers filled with necessities since before the Paleolithic era. According to “In Your Purse” author Kelley Styring, early purse-carriers toted drawstring pouches, in which they held money, valuables and flint for starting fires. With time, men’s clothing developed pocket trousers, while women began carrying pouches in the layers of their skirts. This transitioned into visible purses.
- The average woman carries \$30 in her wallet and \$2 in loose change.
- About 98 percent of all purse-carriers have some sort of reward card or membership in their purse. Conversely, only one in six carries a time-management tool, like a calendar.

In order to alleviate purse-related injuries, Brook A. Townley of Origin Chiropractic and Kevin Bjorlie of Bjorlie Chiropractic offer the following tips:

- Take turns carrying the purse on different shoulders to reduce risk of injury.
- When shopping, take only the items you need – wallet, a brush, a cell phone – and leave anything extra in the car.
- Consider strength-training and stretching exercises to build up shoulder and back muscles. Townley recommends holding your hands up (like you would if told: “This is a stick-up!”) while squeezing shoulder blades together, as if you’re trying to hold a pencil between them. Shoulder shrugs also can help stretch out tired shoulders.

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