

Unit 78 Singular or plural?

a We use some nouns only in the *plural*. For example:

trousers jeans shorts pyjamas tights scissors glasses/spectacles

You can also use **a pair of ...** with these words:

- I need **some new trousers**. *or* I need **a new pair of trousers**.

b We do not often use the plural of **person** ('persons'). Instead we use **people**:

- He is **a nice person**. - They are **nice people**.

c These nouns end in **-s** but they are not usually plural:

- **Athletics is my favourite sport**.
- **What time is the news on television?** (See also **Unit 69d**.)

These words end in **-s** and can be singular *or* plural:

means	a means of transport	many means of transport
series	a television series	two television series
species	a species of bird	200 species of bird

d Some singular nouns are often used with a plural verb. For example:

government staff team family audience committee

We often think of these things as a number of people ('they'), not as one thing ('it'). So we often use a plural verb:

- **The government (= they) want to reduce taxes**.
- **The staff (= they) aren't happy with their new working conditions**.

A singular verb ('The government **wants** ...') is also possible.

Note that we normally use a plural verb with the names of sport teams:

- **Scotland are playing France in a football match next week**.

We always use a plural verb with **the police**:

- **The police have arrested Tom**.
- **Are the police well-paid?**

e Sometimes we use a plural noun with a singular verb. We do this when we talk about a sum of money, a period of time, a distance etc.:

- **Five thousand pounds (= it) was stolen in the robbery**. (*not* 'were stolen')
- **Three years (= it) is a long time to be without a job**. (*not* 'are')

f We say 'a holiday of three **weeks**' but 'a **three-week** holiday':

- I've got **a three-week holiday in July**. (*not* 'a three-weeks holiday')

Here, **three-week** is used as an adjective before 'holiday'. When we use 'three-weeks' as an adjective, it loses the **s**. So we say:

a ten-pound note (<i>not</i> 'pounds')	two 14-year-old girls
a four-week English course	a six-hour journey

You can also say 'I've got three **weeks'** holiday'. See **Unit 79d**.

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