



Photographs by Richard L. Harbus for The New York Times

Getting Epidermal When It's Thermal

As the Mercury Rises, So Do Hemlines and Sleeves. The Exposure Can Raise Goose Bumps.



Bill Cunningham/The New York Times

By FRANCINE PARNES

YOUR office mates are in short sleeves. Your mail carrier is in shorts. Your dog is shedding its fur. The sartorial signals are unmistakable. It's time for the annual strip-down that eels summer.

As hemlines rise with the mercury, summer calls for a lightening of our mood as well as our clothes. For male executives, an early summer might mean three months without a blazer and tie. For the more urbane, the lure is going shoeless or shirtless. For young female trendsetters, summer is a fashion moment to swap regatta-size blouses for pin-sized halters and midriff tops.

Paring down for summer presents a whole different set of fashion pluses and minus. Gail Satler appreciates the airiness of abbreviated clothes, but one scorching day she found herself in a little nothing "a skirt with a big caveat."

"When I was walking, the skirt was mere-ly above the knee, but when I was sitting, it satly rode up," said Ms. Satler, an associate professor of sociology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., who owned a sick denim miniskirt. By the time Professor Satler hit heavy traffic while driving on the Long Island Expressway, her skirt had crumpled up to resemble a piece mat.

"I had my windows down because I didn't have air-conditioning," she said. "I look up, and there's a truck driver looking down at me and smiling. Then he honks the horn and hands up a note. 'Rest stop next exit, want to rest?' Here I am sweltering, the whole point of the skirt was to make me feel cool,

was mortified. The view from above was certainly not what I intended."

She added, "I got home, and that skirt went right into the garbage."

Barring such misadventures, "summer is a sexy season," said Robin Gorman Newman, the author of "How to Meet a Mensch in New York" (City & Company, 1996). "The fashions are fun and flirty, the layers are coming off, and you feel freer. Suddenly gals are wearing short or backless dresses; some guys are wearing muscle T-shirts. There's a lot more to check out."

Joanna Ferguson, who will be a senior at Southampton College in Southampton, N.Y., owns a wardrobe including tank tops, tube tops and capri pants. "At clubs or bars at the beach, people go out in tiny stuff — their bathing suits or short skirts and little shirts," she said. "Everyone is on top of fashion. When it gets warmer, everything you wear is a little smaller."

But to pull off the look, it helps to possess equal doses of youth and confidence.

Summer can arrive hand in hand with anxiety, said Ms. Gorman Newman, who is also the founder of Lovecoach.com, which offers online dating advice. "As soon as the weather turns nice, I get asked all the time by singles, 'Where can I go on vacation to meet other singles?'" she said. "And their next question is, 'Do I have to wear a bathing suit all the time while I am there?' You wonder, will I be the one person on the beach wearing a cover-up?"

There is a sociology of skin.

"We spend so many months of the year hibernating in bulky down coats and covering up our bodies, and the cold climate surrounding us creates these social norms so that we become accustomed to not showing skin," said Carina Bandhauer, assistant professor of sociology at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury.

When summer comes, "It's rather startling to suddenly see so much skin," she said. "It feels weird for us individually when we first transition into summer clothes. We see the abrupt change of seasons, but we also feel the change with the foreign sensation of air on our arms and legs for the first time in many months."

An introduction to summer often occurs in a swimsuit fitting room.

"One of the first things that most customers say when they come in is, 'I hate doing this and I need help,'" said Andrea Bisordi, owner of Tahiti Street swimwear shops in Scarsdale and Greenwich. "You're telling these women, 'You can put this on and go out in public. It's basically lingerie, the same amount of coverage, except that now they're going to the beach, to be seen by hundreds of people.'"

Ms. Bisordi uses part psychological counseling, part fashion advice in her work.

"The customers are so stressed," she said. "You really do feel their pain. Many of our customers have said you have to be a therapist to sell swimsuits."

An even more stressful button is a business trip to a warm-weather resort where swimwear is expected.

"Female executives come into our store and say, 'I don't know which is worse — having to wear a bathing suit in front of my underlings or in front of my superiors,'" Ms. Bisordi said. Typically they buy a conservative swimsuit and a cover-up, like an oversized shirt with a sarong.

"The idea is to get covered as much as possible without losing the poolside look," Ms. Bisordi said. "They'd be happy wearing a coat if they could, but unfortunately in Bermuda it doesn't work."

Others turn to plastic surgery.

"From February to June is our busiest season at my practice," said Dr. Joseph O'Connell, a plastic surgeon in Fairfield. During March and April he often works extended hours to accommodate patients anticipating the swimsuit season.

"I find that most women and men are basically uncomfortable with their bodies," said Dr. O'Connell, who is chief of plastic



Danielle Austin for The New York Times

When warm weather comes around, jackets come off and bare arms and midriffs come out, left. Martin Steinbaum often teaches astronomy at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., in shorts, despite some heckling about his legs. Jill Free, above left, tries on swimwear at the Tahiti Street shop in Greenwich. At the Personal Training Center for Women in Scarsdale, N.Y., Michele Gabriele makes her arms ready for baring, below. Carole Hollander Washington, left, a retail executive at Saks Fifth Avenue at the Mall at Short Hills in New Jersey, wears shorter sleeves and cropped pants in summer.



stimulus for a lot of them to consider plastic surgery. But often the final impetus that brings them to make an appointment with my office is the warmer weather with the change to more revealing clothing."

He added: "You show your face to the public 365 days a year, but your body is revealed for less than half that time. So it is more of a novelty and attracts more attention — and anxiety."

For women who judge their upper arms with the same displeasure as their thighs, going sleeveless can be daunting.

At Personal Training Center for Women in Scarsdale, N.Y., "the number of women coming in to focus on their arms has about doubled in the past five years," said Brad Schoenfeld, president and personal trainer, who cited sleeveless fashion trends.

"I always get people coming in saying, 'I have the bat wings going, the sag behind the arms, the arms that keep waving bye-bye longer after I have stopped waving,'" he said. Body baring can become more appealing if your exercise regimen has paid off.

Mr. Schoenfeld would know. He is author of "Look Great Naked" (2001) and "Look Great Sleeveless" (2002).

"The long-sleeve shirts go away in March and the long pants go away by May," Mr. Schoenfeld said of his wardrobe. "As the weather gets warmer, the clothes get less and less. I have no problem admitting I embrace the season. I love to wear tank tops when appropriate. If I wrote a book called 'Look Great Naked,' you can kind of extrapolate."

Not that you have to write a book with a

skin. Take Martin Steinbaum, adjunct associate professor of astronomy at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y.

"Every opportunity I get, I wear shorts to class," he said. "I run my classes informally. Besides, sometimes the air-conditioning doesn't work, and it's murder to talk in a hot classroom."

And at 66, Professor Steinbaum likes his legs.

Recently he visited New Rochelle High School in his customary black polo shirt and black shorts that hover approximately two inches above the knee.

"One of the assistant principals said, 'Marty, if I had legs like yours, I would wish the temperature were always cold, not hot,'" Professor Steinbaum said. "I guess he didn't like the way my legs looked. But as a matter of fact, my legs are really not bad looking. I think I have lovely legs."

He added: "The first time I wear shorts to class, some students don't bat an eye. But the others are interested in my legs for the first 20 seconds. I have been doing this long enough that I can tell what they are thinking. One of the students in class once said, 'Professor, you have spindly legs.' But it's in good fun. Then we get down to business."

When getting down to business takes place in corporate settings, looking professional while feeling frayed is more challenging.

"You can't shorten your tie to be cool," said Lennox Thomas, a district manager for Brooks Brothers in Short Hills, N.J.

Still, some executives enlist creative solu-

"In the summertime, my best-dressed salesman in Short Hills comes to work impeccably attired — but with no socks," Mr. Thomas said. "That is his idea of the best of summer dress. If you ask any customers about him, they know he is perfectly attired, but if you look carefully you will see his ankles showing out of his Brooks Brothers cordovan loafers."

Bill Fitzgerald, a Manhattan entertainment lawyer from Rowayton goes sockless from March through October, whether in the boardroom or courtroom.

"It's my annual rite of spring and summer, though I would never be comfortable without a suit and tie in a professional situation," said Mr. Fitzgerald, who favors European designers and runs a firm where lawyers typically wear suits.

"It may seem odd to some," he said. "Every spring my colleagues remark with a chuckle, 'It must be March, Bill's not wearing socks.' To me, it's just symbolic of the season."

Summer calls for skimpy footwear that slips off at a moment's notice for barefoot shoreline walks, Professor Satler of Hofstra said.

"I love my 50-cent-type rubber flip-flops from the drugstore," she said. "They go with the whole idea of summer and they are definitely low-maintenance."

Professor Satler has problems with "today's fashionable sandals with their multiple ankle wraps."

"You could never simply slide out of your shoes and put your feet in the water," she said. "The moment would never come. If designers are going to bother, give me a shoe that is cooling. Why make it difficult to open and close? Summer is supposed to be easy."

For Carole Washington, an executive at Saks Fifth Avenue in Short Hills, summer means keeping it simple, even in details.

"It's a constant paring down, from cutting my hair short every summer to wearing lighter makeup," she said. She downsizes by wearing shorter sleeves and cropped pants that lack the ankle.

"You take away some fabric to expose some arm or leg, and it just gives an airier, cooler appearance," Ms. Washington said. "Perhaps it is more of a mind-set, but just shortening the pants by three inches changes the dynamics of going from one season to another."

But not everyone equates summer with lightening up.

"Given the often excessive air-conditioning, I find it's often more a matter of bundling up than paring down," said Jon Romberg, an associate professor of law at Seton Hall University School of Law in Newark. "When I was working in a firm, I actually dressed more warmly in summer than in winter and spent my time pleading with the office manager to lower the air-conditioning."