

### The Thong Thing

***Close to 30 percent of all women in the U.S. say they prefer the fit and feel of the skimpy garments. Think these aren't your grandmother's underwear? ... Think again***

By **BILL VARBLE**

Mail Tribune

Underwear has come a long stretch from when it was "unmentionables." And where the road has led is to the thong, a little thingy that looks like a couple of hanky corners and some dental floss.

It started in strip joints but has clearly hit Main Street. The Monica Lewinsky affair forced the likes of David Halberstam to write about it. Britney Spears and Lil' Kim made videos in it, and young women show it peeking out of low- slung jeans and Juicy Couture sweats.

"I wear them all the time," says Medford businesswoman Jude Santana. "They're the most comfortable thing in the world. It's almost like wearing nothing."

Vrenda Lee, of Ashland, says she was surprised when her younger daughter began wearing thongs at about 13.

"I can't believe you wear those," she said.

"Mom," her daughter said, "you should try 'em."

Lee, 47, says, "Now I buy them for myself and both my daughters."

The thong last year accounted for about a quarter of the \$2.5 billion in sales of women's underwear. Seldom has so much been made of so little.

The thong is a narrow strip of material in front attached to a band around the hips. It migrated in the 1970s from strip clubs to the beaches of Brazil and in the 1990s grew wildly popular as underwear among women, and a small number of men.

In a survey taken for National Underwear Day (coming Wednesday) 28 percent of women said they prefer the thong.

Santana, who's 51, fashionable and a size 16, never thought she could, or should, wear a thong.



"But I was visiting my daughter in Maui, and I thought what the heck," she says. "I bought one with a little T-shirt. After a while I didn't wear the T-shirt."

"When my friends saw it they said, 'You're wearing a string?' "

Amy Maxwell says thongs are hot sellers at Papillon Rouge, the boutique she runs in east Medford. Most of the women thronging to thongs are younger.

"It's basically a generation thing," she says. "I'll get women in their 50s and 60s who've worn briefs all their lives, and they feel like they're not going there. They say, 'What's the point?' They say the thing people say about thongs going up their butt."

In fact, Maxwell says, thongs are more comfortable than regular panties.

"I won't ever wear briefs again in my life," she says. "When you walk, briefs ride up. Thongs don't ride up. They *are* up. ... You have to try it."

One of the main arguments for the thong is the phenomenon of VPL, the dreaded visible panty line.

"A woman will have on this gorgeous outfit, then you see the lines," Maxwell says. "I was behind a well-dressed woman at the airport, and there were those lines. I wanted to tap her on the shoulder and say, 'Have you ever tried a thong?' "

But that doesn't mean that thongs are confined to the young and the fleshless.

Maxwell says she talked a conservative, well-dressed woman in her 50s into trying a thong. The woman said OK, she'd try one, just once.

"Now she buys three at a time," Maxwell says with a laugh.

When the staid Wall Street Journal ran a big feature on Hanky Panky, a line of thongs, the response among the conservative paper's readership was immediate.

"I had women in their 70s coming in," Maxwell says. "They'd say, 'Do you have Hanky Pankies? I want to try them.' It was nuts."

If women don't have to be young to do the thong thing, neither do they have to be asgaunt as, well, an underwear model, says Santana, who runs Foo Foo la Femme, a Medford boutique for plus- size women.

"The larger you are the more you should wear a thong," she says. "Because regular panties have elastic bands, and the bands tend to cut into soft flesh and produce an extra roll."

"That limits your clothing. The thong frees you to wear other things."



Lee, a singer, actress and aspiring filmmaker, says she starting wearing thongs when she was cast as Holly in the play "Anton in Show Business" several years ago.

The character is a sexy star-type who wears a thong.

"I worked out in the gym," Lee says. "I went to the tanning booth. And I started wearing a thong all the time, so I'd be comfortable. I do it with shoes, everything, to get into character.

"They are so comfortable I got hooked. I will not wear anything else."

If the 70s are not too old, how young is too young? Abercrombie & Fitch got itself in hot water with conservative parent groups for marketing thongs to little girls with slogans such as "wink wink" and "kiss me."

The company said the thongs were for girls as young as 10, but the Abercrombie Kids line is aimed at children as young as 7.

What if Lee's daughter had been 10, or 7?

"It's so hard," says Lee, who says she's concerned about the power of corporate marketing.

"I guess it would be an opportunity as a parent to have a conversation."

Despite the thong's ubiquity, there are signs it's nearer the end of its arc than the beginning. After skyrocketing in the late 1990s, sales have flattened the last few years.

Such is the way of fads. And there are new styles. Consider the boy short. A hip-hugging brief, it hugs the bottom instead of exposing it. It extends farther down the legs than traditional women's briefs. It even comes in microfiber materials that almost eliminate VPL.

## Thongs in Brief

- The thong first became popular a generation ago as a swimsuit style in Brazil.
- You can buy disposable thongs.
- You can buy thongs with jokes printed on the front — about the only place they can be printed.
- Some gynecologists say that women prone to infections should stick to regular cotton panties.
- Men's thongs are a small share of the market (4 percent of men say they prefer them, versus 28 percent of women).
- Thousands of thongs were among the items shipped to Sri Lanka after the Dec. 26 tsunami, along with winter jackets, winter tents and stiletto-heeled evening shoes.
- Fans of Sisco's "Thong Song" ("Baby I know you wanna show/Duh dun duh/That thong thong thong thong thong") claimed the song was about "standing up to the machinery that runs our lives."



[www.freshpair.com](http://www.freshpair.com) and news reports

## **The Bottom Line**

A survey of 20,000 commissioned by freshpair.com, an underwear retailer and organizer of National Underwear Day on Wednesday, showed these preferences:

Women who...

Prefer panties: 49 percent

Prefer thongs: 28 percent

Prefer "boysshorts": 13 percent

Prefer "other": 4 percent

Prefer to wear nothing: 6 percent

Men who...

Prefer boxers: 25 percent

Prefer briefs: 32 percent

Prefer boxer briefs: 28 percent

Prefer thongs: 4 percent

Prefer "other": 4 percent

Prefer to wear nothing: 7 percent

Source: [www.freshpair.com](http://www.freshpair.com)

Reach reporter Bill Varble at 776-4478 or e-mail [bvarble@mailtribune.com](mailto:bvarble@mailtribune.com).