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Tighty-Whiteys Fade To Black As Colorful Men's Styles Surge

For years, the men's underwear business watched as the staid skivvies drawer went through a fitful, if fascinating, metamorphosis.

The basic white brief - the BVD or the y-front that was the underwear staple for generations of men - slowly declined in popularity since the early '90s as boxer briefs and athletic briefs became bigger players in men's undergarments. Woven boxers, despite the college-age appeal, remained low on the underwear totem pole. Even thongs saw growth as the tighty-whitey continued its fall from grace.

Today, the whitey is diminishing, but the tighty has taken on new significance. As we celebrate National Underwear Day today (an initiative by Freshpair.com, a leading retailer of men's and women's underwear), the changes in undergarments are most keenly seen in men's shopping aisles. Bright colors, snugger fits, athletic cuts and daring low-risers are the hot players in the men's underwear market.

In the past five years, the changes have been especially dramatic as different styles and an unprecedented number of new brands have challenged the tighty-whitey. The classic "boxers or briefs" question is fast losing its validity as both mainstays bow to the growing in-between underwear.

"Today there are as many styles and colors in men's undergarments as there are in women's collections," said Lauren Deatherage, trend analyst for Cotton Inc. "Men are paying more attention to their wardrobe and realize, just as women do, one style does not fit all when it comes to underwear. A slimmer pant requires a slimmer undergarment. For sports players and gymgoers, a more athletic, supportive style is necessary."

According to Deatherage, the trends in men's underwear include athletic, supportive styles; bright, fashionable colors with novelty prints; and low-rise briefs and boxer briefs to accommodate lower-rise fashions.

Neil Mulhall, president of Undergear, couldn't agree more. Undergear's aggressively sexy and fashion-forward inventory doesn't include a single pair of woven boxers.

"The trend in underwear is all about fit and quality," Mulhall said. "We're seeing more product that includes Lycra for better fit and shape retention. ... Our customer wants to look as good on the inside as on the outside."

That need to look good is a major factor in the trend away from tighty-whitey. As men continue to care about their looks, their clothes and their bodies - the hallmarks of the metrosexual era - they also have eschewed traditional underwear.

"It's about lifestyle. Guys are spending more time taking care of their bodies and how they look underneath their clothes. It makes sense that the layer next to the skin is going to get some attention as well," said Damien Nunes, fashion editor for



GQ magazine.

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"Underwear has become another way for guys to express themselves. We've seen bright boxers for a long time; now it's moving into briefs. Now we're seeing the low-rise brief, patterned underwear and color - fun, bright underwear."

GQ's September issue includes a piece on the new, snuggler briefs with bright colors and playful patterns. Those are the trends that Freshpair, the Internet retail leader for men's underwear, cites in its 2006 report. Boxer briefs, colored underwear, printed underwear, low-rise underwear and athletic-cut underwear are the major trends and sales leaders for men this year. Many low-rise cuts don't even have a fly, another rather interesting change.

"Both men and women are trading up from their traditional tighty-whities and buying into new and more comfortable panties and underwear," said Freshpair president Michael Kleinmann in tracking the United States' \$14 billion underwear market (of which, men's growth this year at 6 percent is outpacing women's growth of 4 percent).

"Most of the underwear sold today is dramatically lower on the hips with an increasing number of women opting for seamless intimate apparel. Also, the classic men's underwear with an operable fly is fast disappearing."

This may be shocking to the BVD fan, but it makes perfect sense to the younger, more discerning customer who is making fashion and fit more important considerations. And, in growing numbers, he is purchasing for himself instead of letting mom, a girlfriend or wife shop, industry spokespeople said. Tighty-whitey, it seems, has been forced to grow up.

"Modern man has a more evolved relationship with his underwear than his 20th-century predecessors. He will shop for underwear himself, he'll buy underwear that flatters his assets and even get a little adventurous with the style," said Matthew Edelstein, Details' fashion editor. "Due to a cultural shift in how men view themselves and how they want to be viewed by others, men want to feel sexy and look their best. Let's call it the residual effects of the dreaded metrosexual."

Men's underwear, too, is changing as it follows fashion. Skinny jeans, a trend popular with women, are catching on with men as they move away from the boot-cut jean to the low-rise, slim-fit jean, Mulhall said. You can't wear boxer shorts or high-waisted briefs with the new skinny jean.

"A lot of intimate apparel takes its tip from the general fashion trends," said Thomas Onorato, spokesman for Freshpair. "Now that jeans rise lower and are a little snuggler, the undergarments have evolved. It's not shocking. It makes sense."

Just as men started getting into boxer briefs, they're now being seduced by daring low-rise underwear (some of which looks like little-boy novelty underwear for big boys) and athletic underwear made from performance fabrics that stretch and wick away moisture. Color blocking, prints and playful piping are also hot trends.

Onorato suggested there's something of an "if you build it, they will come"-type thing going on in the men's underwear aisles. Underwear manufacturers are putting



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so much out there, it's almost inevitable that tighty-whitey is getting bullied out of the playground.

"Whether they're shopping at Saks or Wal-Mart, men are being offered a larger product selection now," he said.

No one expects all guys to jump on the bandwagon.

"Are men less apprehensive about buying fashion underwear? Probably. But there's still a large sector of men who stick to their three-packs of underwear. Those guys won't necessarily change that quickly," Nunes said.

"But for a more stylish guy or a more fashionable guy, there's a lot out there. It's a way to express yourself."

About Freshpair:

Freshpair is a leading Internet retailer of men's and women's intimate apparel, offering hundreds of styles of bras, panties, t-shirts, boxers, briefs, socks, sleepwear, and more. From full-figure to petite, shapewear to thongs, boxers to briefs, and everything in between, we are the ultimate destination for intimate apparel shopping. Freshpair.com carries many of the major brand names including 2(x)ist, C-IN2, Calvin Klein, Wacoal, Chantelle, Le Mystere, and Bali.