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What to Wear to (Pretty Much) Every Occasion

Finally, your go-to guide for how to dress at different events, from weddings to wakes, and everything in between.

By [Lisa Milbrand](#) | Updated on May 06, 2024

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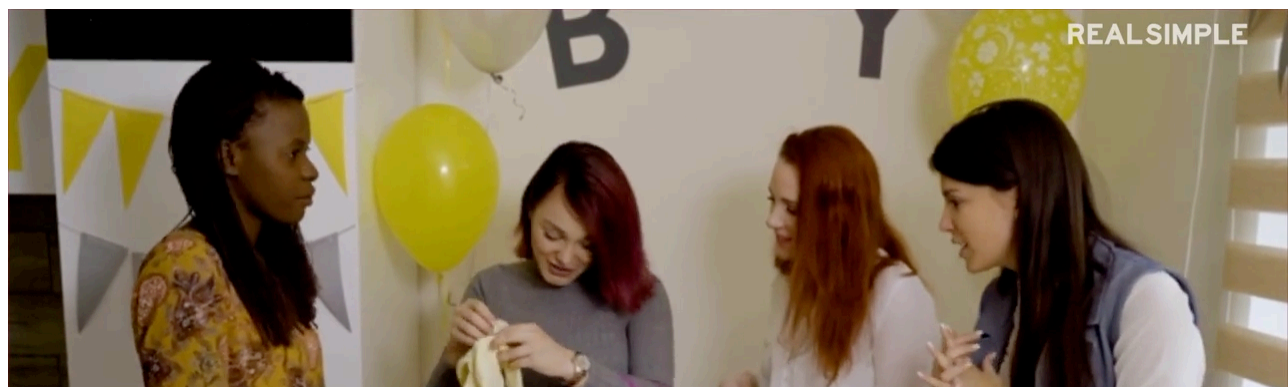
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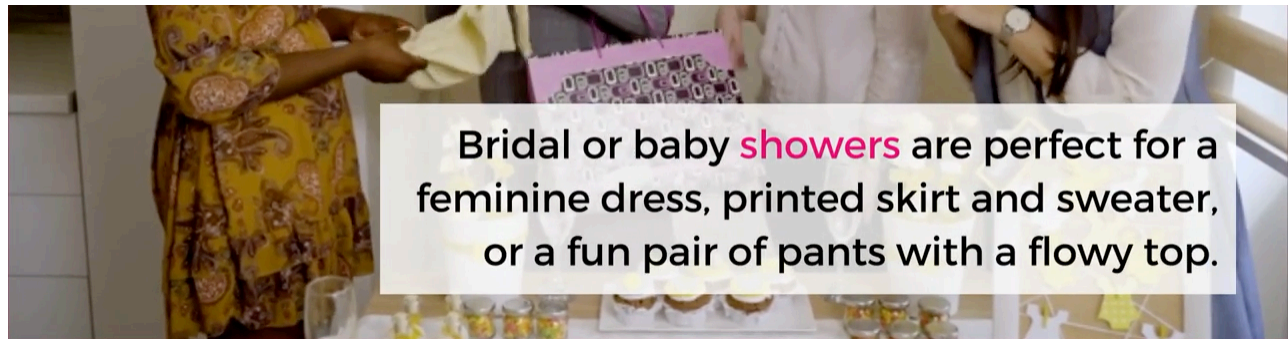
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Figuring out what to wear to everything from special occasions like weddings to job interviews can be a bit confusing—especially as some events have become more casual (and others definitely have not.) And there are a lot of these types of occasions to navigate—weddings, baptisms, networking events, funerals, job interviews, barbecues, holiday parties, baby and bridal showers. What you wear also depends on other factors: the venue, the formality of the invite, the weather, and often what everyone else plans to wear. Put an end to the what-do-I-wear dilemma once and for all with this breakdown of every imaginable event dress code from *Real Simple* fashion editors and fashion experts.

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Formal Events

What to Wear to Formal Events



PHOTO: REAL SIMPLE

Formal events may be a little more prescriptive about their dress code. (You might see "black tie requested" on a formal wedding invite, for instance.) But you'll still need to find the perfect, flattering ensemble for you that suits that celebration.

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Baptism, Bar Mitzvah, or Other Religious Ceremony

What to Wear: Rely on a pretty daytime dress, maybe in a pastel or floral, or a suit paired with feminine underpinnings and accents. Bring a light sweater, blazer, or neat jacket to cover up sleeveless styles. If there's a reception immediately following the ceremony, and no time to change in

between, wear a cocktail dress or dressy pants with a jacket or wrap to cover up in the temple or church.

What to Avoid: Skip anything low cut, short, or clingy.

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Black-Tie Wedding or Charity Gala

What to Wear: Think tuxedos, shimmery fabrics, and ornate details. While etiquette rules are softening on the question of dress length, your best bet is a tea- or floor-length gown. A column or A-line dress is most sophisticated, but you could wear a well-tailored, chic, and formal suit. Now's the time to elevate your look with elegant jewelry, fabulous shoes, and a great hairstyle.

What to Avoid: Keep the hem length longer, unless the invite says "black tie optional." Then you can feel free to loosen up slightly with a formal knee-length cocktail dress.

Cocktail Party, Engagement Party, and Most Weddings

What to Wear: The party dress code for one of these relatively fancy events will likely be "cocktail attire" (although they're not quite as fancy as a black-tie party). So opt for a cocktail dress—you can't go wrong with a little black dress or a stand-out jewel-tone or pastel number. You can also mix it up with dressy separates.

These days, a cocktail party can be anything from a swanky society affair—cue that glittery knee-length number from the "special occasions" department—to a low-key group of friends gathered around a platter of appetizers. But for the most part, "cocktail parties are dressy-casual, so you can't go wrong if you wear a top with some special details and a skirt or tailored pants, plus heels or fancy flats," says fashion stylist Joseph Williamson.

TIP

Different cities have their own dress codes, so you might want to keep that in mind. "Cocktail attire in Miami is just as dressy and chic as in New York, regardless of the weather differences, while in San Diego, it's interpreted a bit more casually because the city is relaxed," says Lauren A. Rothman, founder of [Style Auteur](#), a fashion-consulting firm based in Washington, D.C.

What to Avoid: "Avoid fabrics that are too casual, like chino, jersey, and denim." Also, stay away from super-short styles. To test if a hemline is appropriate, stand with your hands at your sides: The hem shouldn't be higher than your fingertips.

Holiday Party, Dinner Party, or "Festive Attire" Event

What to Wear: These occasions let you push the limits on glitz and color. So, in essence, almost anything goes, as long as it's nice enough to suit the venue and occasion. Have fun with a statement necklace or earrings that wow. Then, pair it with a colorful dress, a sleek jumpsuit, or a festive top paired with a fun midi skirt or palazzo pants. Bonus points if you rock textured embellishments, like feathers, tassels, lace, sequins, beading, or bows.

What to Avoid: You'll want to keep the guest list (and the party theme) in mind when you're planning. If it's an all-ages ugly sweater holiday party, for instance, an ugly sweater is essential—and you'll want to avoid any off-color ones if there are kids around.

Casual Events

What to wear to casual events



PHOTO: REAL SIMPLE

Casual can sometimes be a tricky note to hit fashion-wise—especially as more and more events are touting a "casual" dress code. When choosing what to wear to a casual event, try to find that happy medium between formal glam and your comfy at-home wardrobe.

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Outdoor, Day, or More Casual Wedding

What to Wear: Assuming an outdoor wedding is happening when the weather's warm, opt for a flowy sundress, a glam maxi dress, or a stylish shift dress. It's not that black isn't allowed, but lighter and brighter shades—and splashy patterns—often feel more appropriate. Also, shoot for shades that complement the natural surroundings, like blues, greens, yellows, and coral. Opt for a knee-length dress in a material like cotton; in warmer weather or regions, strapless styles and open-toed shoes get the nod of approval.

RELATED: [I Found Amazon's 8 Best Fall Maxi Dresses That Look High End but Are All Under \\$50](#)

What to Avoid: "For day weddings, which tend to be more casual, steer clear of anything heavily beaded or sequined," says Rothman. For outdoor events, just say no to heels, which could sink into the lawn or beach.

Bridal Shower or Baby Shower

What to Wear: Something like a flattering, feminine dress, printed skirt and sweater, or a fun pair of pants and a flowy top works great for showers. Wear flats or heels (whatever you're comfortable in), or opt for cute booties if it's chilly out.

What to Avoid: Bridal showers follow similar rules to a wedding: Wearing white should be reserved for the bride unless she or the shower hosts specify otherwise. Black isn't forbidden, but make sure it leans more on the side of chic than somber.

Family Get-Together, Barbecue, or Birthday Party

What to Wear: Take a cue from the host: If they're always dressed to impress, put some effort into your look, too. Go laid-back with a pair of nice jeans, a fun top, and stylish sneakers, sandals, or flats.

What to Avoid: Leave the yoga pants, graphic tees, and worse-for-wear sneakers at home.

On a Cruise

What to Wear: Your chosen cruise line will most likely have a website with an explainer of what to pack for your trip in general and its specific cruise ship dining and event dress codes.

During the day, for a warm-weather cruise, pack what you would for a warm beach vacation: shorts, breezy shirts, sundresses, skirts, bathing suits, coverups, sandals, and sneakers. For a cold-weather cruise, pack a variety of things you might wear during the day on a fall or winter getaway: jeans, leggings, slacks, sweaters, sneakers, winter coat, boots, and

flats (bring a bathing suit or two if there's a hot tub or indoor pool). Be comfortable and relaxed, but aware that you're not at home by yourself.

Many cruise ships have multiple restaurant options that range in formality, from totally casual to smart casual and formal. Otherwise, if there's only one main dining room, the dress code may change throughout the cruise (for example, casual the first night, and formal or maybe even black-tie to celebrate the last night). Bring a few dinner outfit options for each requirement.

You can't go wrong with a knee-length sundress or clean white jeans and a nice top paired with sandals or flats for a casual dinner. Step that up with nicer pants in place of white denim, elegant jewelry, and a pair of wedges or chunky heels for a smart-casual night. Fancy tea- or floor-length dresses, heels, and a pretty wrap work perfectly for formal nights. Again, some cruises incorporate a black-tie dinner, in which case, go ahead and dress to the nines.

What to Avoid: Bathing suits without cover-ups, bare feet, and ripped jeans aren't allowed in even the most casual dining establishments.

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Professional Functions

Work clothing has undergone a bit of a transformation over the past few years, thanks to more work from home and hybrid work options. But for opportunities where you're hoping to make a very good first impression, you'll definitely want to put away the jeans and opt for something that says "pro."

What to Wear to Work

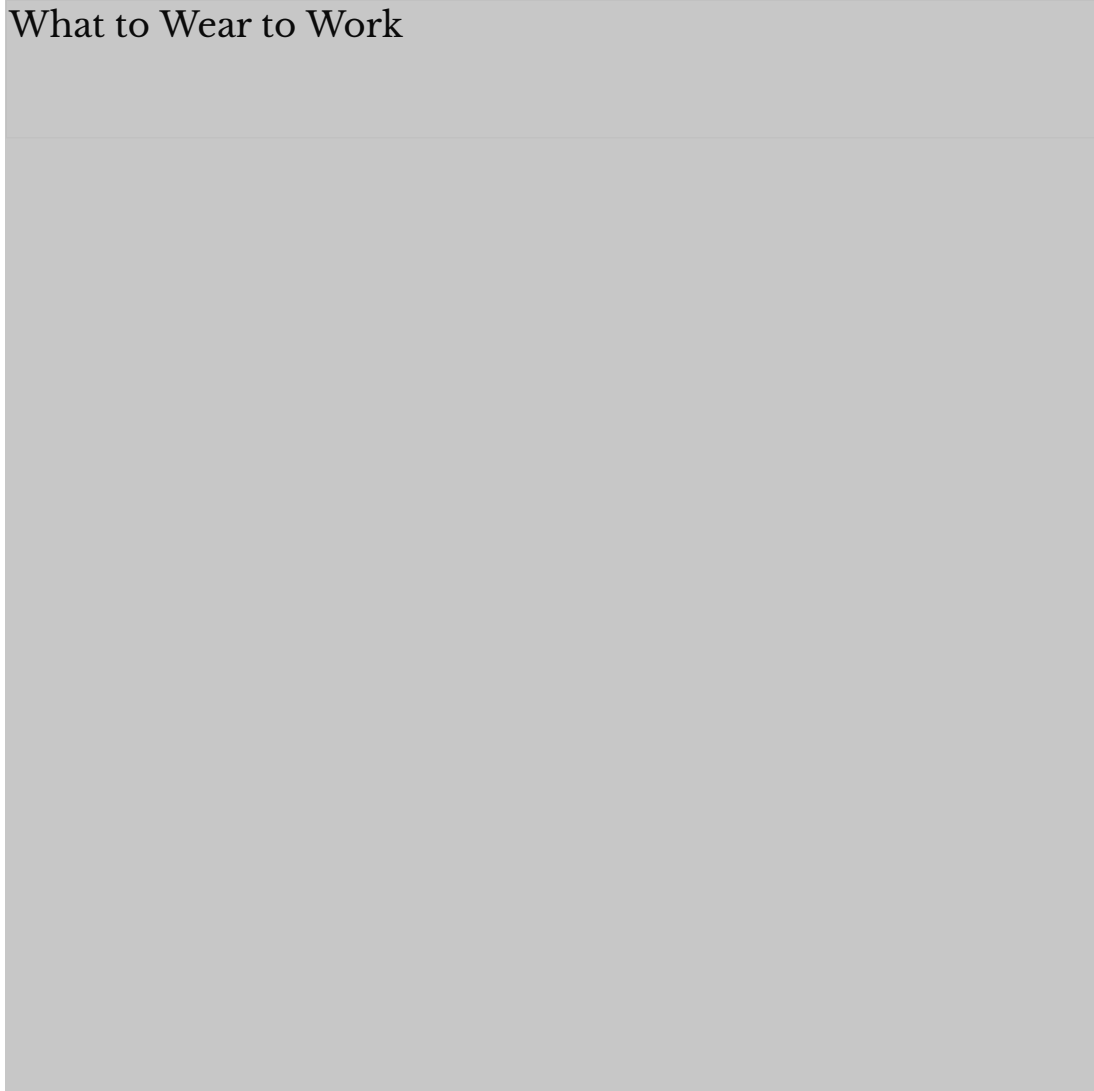


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Job Interview

What to Wear; Keep it clean, professional, and appropriate. Pumps and a tailored suit (pants or a skirt) or simple black or navy dress always work great as a [job interview outfit](#). These tend to be the standard for most corporate companies, although if you're job-searching in a more laid-

back industry, like at a tech startup, design firm, or hip magazine, feel more free to [express your personal style](#).

What to Avoid: Veering too trendy or casual can be off-putting. Steer clear of jangly, distracting jewelry, and avoid denim (yes, even if the prospective company dress code is casual; you should always be more dressed up than the people who work there).

Graduation

What to Wear: Don't overthink what to wear to a graduation event. It's nice and neat but not super dressy. If you're the graduate, don't put on anything you'll regret wearing in tons of graduation photos or at a celebratory lunch with your grandparents. A knee-length colorful, white, or floral dress is a great option that fits the exciting occasion. Also, wear comfortable heels, flats, wedges, or nice sandals to walk across the stage smoothly.

For someone else's graduation, follow similar guidelines as above, or as you would for a springtime baptism, bar mitzvah, or Easter celebration: neat, fun, and thoughtful, but not overly fancy. Try chic, cropped pants with a nice top, a pretty patterned skirt, or a cheerful sundress made with nice fabric.

What to Avoid: Choose your ensemble closer to the big day, so you can avoid being inappropriately dressed for the weather. Many graduations occur in late spring or early summer and often involve sitting outside for long grad ceremonies. You might be sweltering hot in long sleeves or pants, so opt for a breezy A-line dress or skirt to keep cool. If it's raining, you may be moved to an over-air-conditioned auditorium or gymnasium, so bring a wrap or sweater to keep from freezing.

Business Dinner, Work Party, or Networking Event

What to Wear: One adjective to give you direction: polished. When you're dressing for a work function, the culture of your office should prevail. "If it's a conservative environment, dress conservatively for events, too," Williamson says.

Go a step up from what you'd wear to the office. Wear a pretty necklace or blouse with your suit, or try a skirt and heels instead of pants and flats. You know your company dress code best, but again, err on the conservative side, especially if you're mingling with clients or work superiors. For a casual outing, like the company picnic or charity 3K run, it's OK to dress comfortably for the activities on the itinerary.

What to Avoid: Skip anything questionable or provocative (super-revealing tank tops, barely-there ripped denim shorts, or T-shirts with eyebrow-raising messaging or graphics).

Funeral or Wake

What to Wear to a Funeral



PHOTO: REAL SIMPLE

What to Wear: A safe route for what to wear to a funeral is usually a pantsuit or knee-length dress with a cardigan or jacket on top. Jewelry should be quiet and refined (simple studs and a minimalist pendant necklace).

As for color, black is a standard choice but not mandatory. What's most important is to convey the solemnity of the event, which can be accomplished with toned-down clothing in "dark neutrals, like navy, brown, and forest green," says etiquette expert Leah Ingram. Dark and discreet patterns are also perfectly acceptable.

What to Avoid: Skip anything too flashy or trendy; keep it neat, respectful, and modest (unless you've been told otherwise).

School

What to Wear to School



PHOTO: KAILEY WHITMAN/RS

What to Wear: Sweats are just fine for class or study days, Rothman says, "Look for coordinated sweats, which show intention and have style. Style doesn't take more than five minutes to achieve."

You may want to up your game for something a little more professional on days when you're meeting with your professors or other key people about internships or other opportunities. "Whether it's a college interview or for a job or internship, executive presence should be part of your narrative," Rothman says. "That doesn't always mean a suit—you could consider coordinated separates."

Layers are key when you're having a busy day, as you can stay cozy in a hoodie or jacket for that 8 a.m. class, then ditch it when the afternoon gets warm.

What to Avoid: If it's seen better days—has stains, tears, or otherwise

looks ratty—you shouldn't be wearing it out and about. "Save it for the dorm," Rothman says.

Rock Concert or Music Festival

What to Wear to Rock Concerts



PHOTO: KAILEY WHITMAN/RS

What to Wear: This is your opportunity to have fun and express yourself with fashion—whether you want to pay homage to the act you're seeing (a la all the Swiftie Eras ensembles) or stand out from the crowd.

But don't forget to think functional as well as fun—you may want to have layers so you can put a jacket on if the night gets chilly, or a hat to help with sun protection at an all-day concert.

Your shoe decision should be about style and comfort. You may want something that offers a little arch support if you'll be standing for long periods of time during the show.

And make sure that you look at any rules and regulations for the venue, as many now require clear bags for holding your essentials.

What to Avoid: Flip-flops and open-toed shoes may put you at risk of injury if you're in a larger crowd.

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Opera, Ballet or Symphony Concert

What to Wear to Symphony or Ballet



PHOTO: KAILEY WHITMAN/RS

What to wear: You'll want to research the dress code before you decide what to wear, Rothman says. Some events—opening nights or galas, for instance—would likely encourage attendees to opt for a black-tie or formal dress code.

But even if the event is more casual, you can always opt to pull out your best for the occasion. "It can still be fun to dress up and do something different, when you're somewhere beautiful." She recommends the classic little black dress as a fallback if you aren't sure what to wear, paired with a clutch and a stacked heel.

What to Avoid: Even if it is a more casual event, you may want to steer clear of anything *too* casual, like cutoff jeans or a graphic T.

Shopping Excursion

What to Wear Shopping

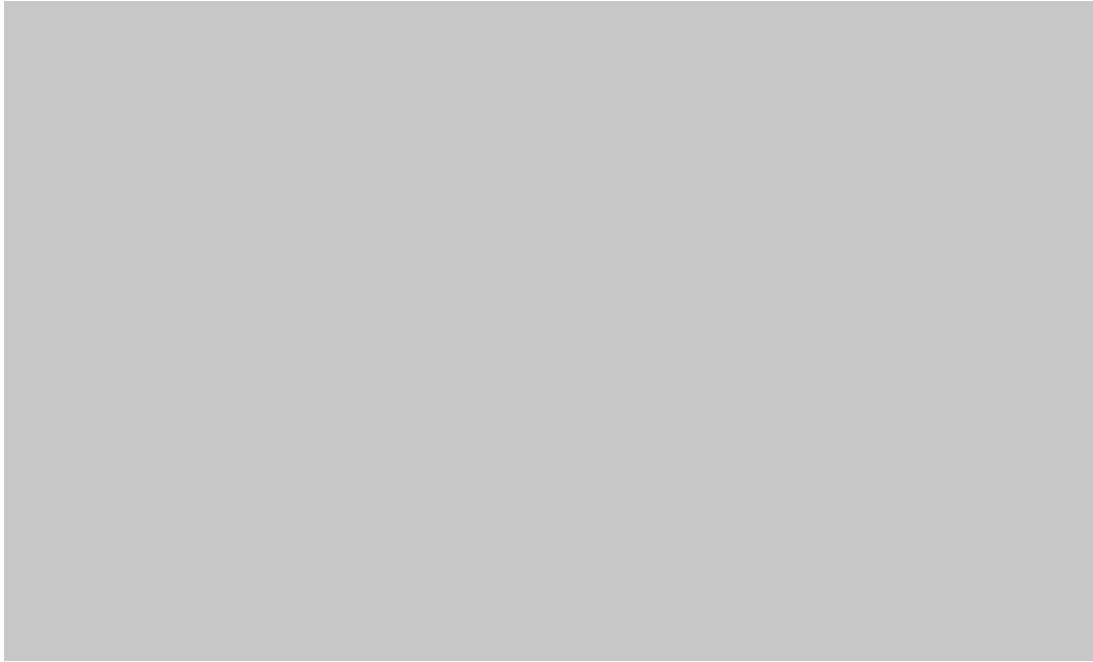


PHOTO: KAILEY WHITMAN/RS

What to Wear: Think about what you're shopping for, and be ready to look your best in those pieces. Your foundation pieces are key. "Wear your best bra and seamless underwear," Rothman says. "I've already had clients who forgot to wear underwear—and your sports bra is not going to cut it." Choose clothes that are easy to slip on and off, like joggers or a wide-legged pant and perhaps a tank with a button-down over it.

Bring along or wear what you'll need to finish the picture—like strappy heels if you're trying on dresses for a wedding, or a pair of jeans if you're looking for boots to wear with them. And Rothman suggests ensuring that your hair and makeup are done, too. "If you're shopping for vacation, make sure you put on your sparkle oil or self-tanner," she says. "The fluorescent lights are harsh, and you want to go in there feeling good"

What to Avoid: Skip anything that takes a long time to take on and off—such as leggings, shirts with complicated sleeves, or high tops with a lot of laces.

If You're Pregnant

What to Wear When You're Expecting

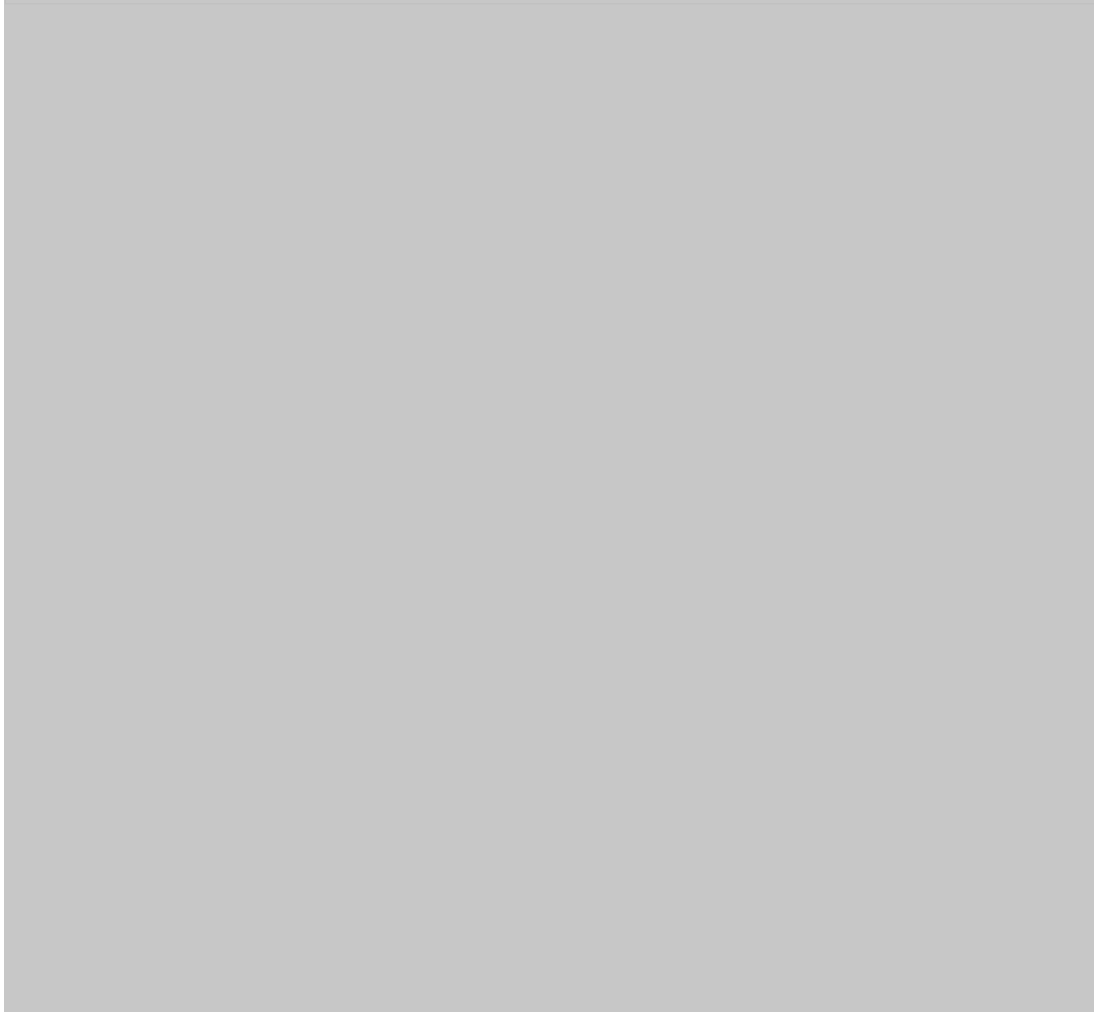


PHOTO: KAILEY WHITMAN/RS

What to Wear: Rothman suggests you lean into the maternity wear early, since the clothes are just as stylish as mainstream clothing, and they have elastic and stretch to keep you covered from when you first pop through the postpartum period.

"Many women wait until they really look pregnant, and then they say to themselves, it's only a couple of months left," she says. "But you shouldn't

just dress for the last three months, and you'll continue to wear those clothes on your way down—so it's not a waste of money."

Maxi dresses are a favorite during pregnancy, and Rothman also suggests the "side tuck" to help cover an early pregnancy. "Take an oversized t-shirt, and tuck it in at your hipbone. Then create an asymmetrical line, cutting down the belly toward the top of your upper thigh."

What to Avoid: If you're still trying to keep your pregnancy under wraps, but your belly isn't cooperating, avoid anything too tight to help hide it.

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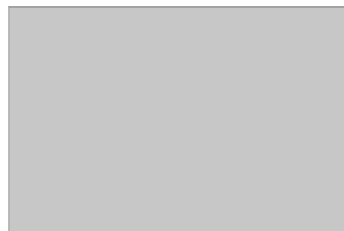
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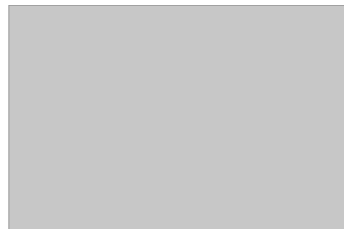
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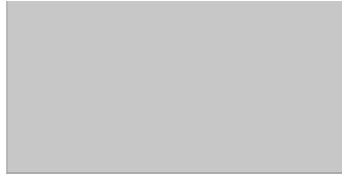
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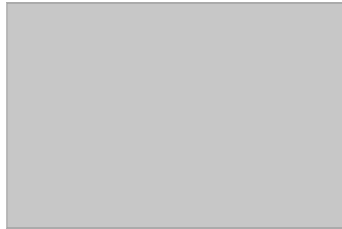


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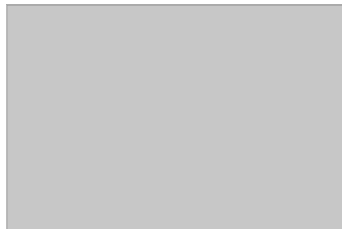
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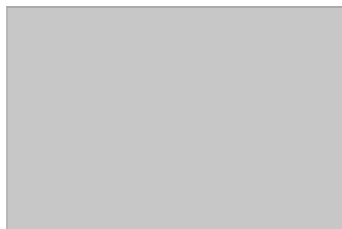
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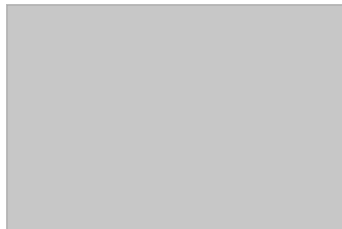
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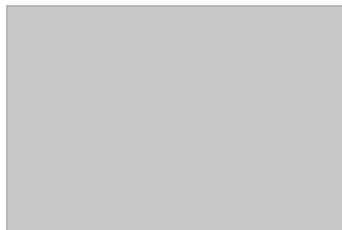
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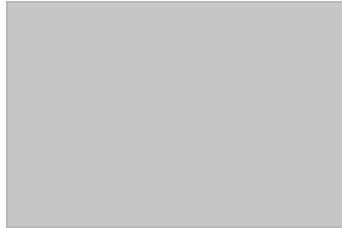
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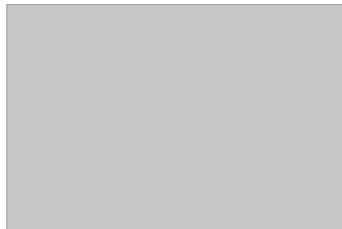
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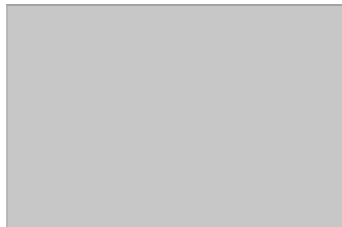
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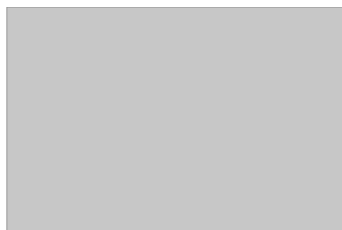
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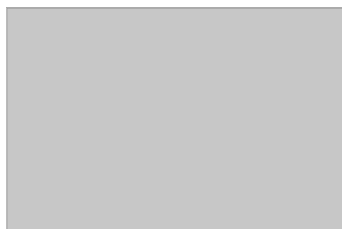
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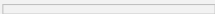
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