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How much is too much

Let's talk cleavage:
 Alluring, accidental
 or plain out of place

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Much of the time, it's only a slight gap, a bare hint of skin. Sometimes, it's hardly a shadow.

Other times, it's eye-dropping, heart-stopping, jaw-dropping.

Just say the word "cleavage" and you're bound to get giggles, knowing looks or, if you're speaking to a man, a certain, sudden alertness.

In the wake of preteens sporting plunging necklines and a certain presidential candidate's recent "bra"-haha, it's no wonder cleavage is on people's minds.

It's here. It's there. It's everywhere.

The easiest way to show femininity and sexuality is to display some cleavage, says Elisabeth Squires of Seattle.

Squires says that while cleavage is appropriate for evening wear, there are workplace situations where it may be the wrong fashion call.

In an Advertising Age magazine survey last year, 71 percent of men and 89 percent of women said that cleavage in the workplace was unprofessional.

But, Squires says, cleavage should be "brought out" for certain situations. Her book, "bOObs: A Guide to the Girls," (Seal Press, \$15.95) is due in stores this week.

She believes the padded push-up bra is responsible, in part, for the increasing number of cups running over. She also credits a swell in breast implants and the rise in obesity.

Fashion in general — not just the push-up bra — might also be a culprit, says Karen Videtic, chairwoman of Virginia Commonwealth University's department of fashion design and merchandising.

There's a theory in fashion that the focal point of the body moves around.

"The last few years, it was 'junk in the trunk,' a booty kind of focus," says Videtic. "A few seasons ago, it was the belly, showing the midriff."

Videtic feels today's ubiquity of cleavage is partly due to a pendulum swing. All fashion goes to excess, she says.

"When it can't get any shorter, it goes back down. When pants can't get any lower on the hips, they go back up.

"When you can't get any skinnier, there's a move to the more voluptuous body."

Cleavage is definitely in, says Videtic. But when is it appropriate?

Several weeks ago, Ann Lewis, senior adviser to Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., included some pointed comments in a fundraising letter after Washington Post writer Robin Givhan took note of the senator's lower-than-usual neckline.

Response to Givhan's column was immediate and considerable. Pundits dubbed the incident "cleavage-gate."

The fundraising letter said, "Can you believe that The Washington Post wrote a 746-word article on Hillary's cleavage? ... I've seen some off-topic press coverage — but talking about body parts? That is grossly inappropriate.

"Frankly, focusing on women's bodies instead of their ideas is insulting. It's insulting to every woman who has ever tried to be taken seriously in a business meeting."

Givhan said the bit-o-cleavage Clinton displayed was surprising because of the location — live on the Senate floor and airing on C-SPAN2 — and the person — a presidential candidate.

Some people thought Clinton was simply trying to look more feminine. Squires thinks she was wearing the wrong size bra.

"You only get cleavage if you press them together," she says. "A different bra might not have even shown it."

Catherine Ingrassia, an English professor at VCU, wonders if Clinton's cleavage would have received as much attention if she weren't running for office.

"Why do we recoil seeing her flesh?" she asks. "We're wearing V-necks under our suits; that's sort of a nod to cleavage."

Some professionals, such as former O.J. Simpson prosecutor Marcia Clark, have more than a nodding acquaintance with cleavage.

The previously modest-looking Clark, who now serves as legal correspondent for TV's "Entertainment Tonight" and "The Insider," is, as they say, letting it all hang out.

Then there's ABC co-anchor Cynthia McFadden, whose recent appearance in a down-to-there dress was startling, even on late-night TV.

Host Jimmy Kimmel apologized for staring, saying her cleavage distracted him.

What does this convey to younger women? "A girl of 13 doesn't necessarily look like I did at 13," Videtic points out. "Young women are maturing much earlier.

"Every 13-year-old wants to look 17. The difference is the exposure to the media and what the stars wear — the Britneys, the Parisés. Let's face it ... there's a lack of good role models."

Videtic is concerned that younger girls not



Marcia, Marcia, Marcia Clark, former prosecutor of O.J. Simpson, has gone Hollywood and "Holy cow!"



Sen. Hillary Clinton (top), singer Beyoncé Knowles and actor Mary-Kate Olsen take the plunge, neckline-wise.



Chefs such as Glada de Laurentis have inspired local college students to call the Food Network "Cooking With Cleavage."

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Cleavage

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only are lacking role models, but also are having breast augmentation and relying on societal images to tell them what's beautiful.



Squires

And parents are concerned that those girls are showing cleavage. Squires thinks the problem can stem from what younger girls *don't* know about their breasts, about how to fit a bra, about what showing cleavage might say about them.

The author says she's been breast-obsessed since her early teens when she first "sprouted."

She wrote a short story for a writing class — calling it her "mammoir" — after she had her breasts lifted at age 47.

"It resonated with the people in the class," she says.

"These guys are like moving targets on our chests. We needed a guide."

Her book covers topics such as how to take care of breasts, breast augmentation, how to find the right size bra, breast cancer and, of course, cleavage.

"Obviously, women with larger breasts show more cleavage," says Squires.

"Breasts are sexual, and they are beautiful.

"They're meant to be a dis-

traction in advertising."

But because it's all over TV, billboards and the Web, she says, doesn't mean cleavage belongs in class or at work.

"Men actually say they wish sometimes women would not show so much because it's hard not to look. They're visual animals."

If you really feel the need to show cleavage in the workplace, says Squires, just understand people are looking at that, not your PowerPoint presentation.

Consider the message you're giving, she says. If you want to give that message, it's great.

If not, reconsider what you're willing to show.

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