

Playing with layering

by Jennifer Davies

Layering. It's one of the hottest looks of the season and also one of the trickiest to pull off.

You can blame the confusion on designer Marc Jacobs, who came up with the style after praying in the Himalayas. You might find yourself praying, too, as one wrong move can turn a layered look from boho chic to bag-lady eek.

LEARN TO LAYER - Layering your wardrobe is the hottest look of the season. It is also hard to pull off. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik. Those on the East Coast have had a head start in layering because, well, brrr, it's cold back there. That doesn't mean the look can't work out here. In fact, with our warm days and cool nights, layering makes fashion as well as comfort sense.

While it's supposed to look like you casually threw together your ensemble, there are rules that make layering work.

Here are tips on how to avoid "looking like a Christmas tree," as Stephanie Solomon, a fashion director for Bloomingdale's, puts it.

THE LOOK, STEP-BY-STEP

Layer 1: Tanks (you'll need lots and lots of them). They should be long and lightweight.

Layer 2: T-shirts - long sleeve or short. Make sure the tanks peak out - either at the neckline or at the hip. Or throw on a sheer top for a dressier look.

Layer 3: Sweater coat, jacket or a hoodie for the younger fashionistas. Sweater coats should reach to the end of your fingertips.

Layer 4: Denim - skinny jean, wide leg, skirts with leggings - it doesn't matter, it all works in layering. Other options include pants, skirts, slip dresses, and, of course, the must-have layering piece of the season, the jumper.

Layer 5: Accessories. Keep it simple with a wide belt. Make sure it's big enough so it doesn't get lost amid the layers.

DO'S AND DON'TS

- Never layer more than three T-shirts, or else you'll look like the Michelin Man.
- Use color but don't overdo it. If the first layer is a bright color, go neutral in the outer layers. If you start with a neutral color instead, use color on the outer layer.
- Watch the patterns. More than one can and you look like a clown - typically not a good thing.
- "Never layer a gown ... a gown should be a gown," Solomon says.
- Dresses over jeans. Only for the very young and for fashiontrailblazers. Extremely easy to mess up. Think bag lady above.
- Mix up proportions and lengths. Volume tops and dresses and skinny, sleek bottoms. Short-sleeve blouses over long-sleeve T-shirts.
- Leggings as pants. Sure it's hip, but so was acid-wash once. Try only if you are under 25, weigh less than 110 pounds and think Britney Spears is aprude.

BETTER SWEATER

Sure, the new sweater dresses are cute, but they have so much more oomph and style when you add a little layering. Put a long sleeve t-shirt underneath, double up on the leggings for an unexpected twist and add a splash of color with a wide belt.

NIGHT FOR DAY

Make a black slip dress young, flirty and office-appropriate by layering a colorful tank under it. Add some leggings - black will work best. Remember what we said about too much color. Finish it off with ballet flats or pumps and a sleek sweater coat.

BLEND THE SEASONS

Think it's too cold to wear that cute sheer blouse you bought this summer? Think again. Put it over a thin turtleneck sweater pair with some skinny jeans and voila - another layered look that works.

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