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Rules of red

Make magic with your wardrobe to look your sexiest on Valentine's Day

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BY **MAUREEN JENKINS** Staff Reporter

Maybe crimson's your least favorite shade. Or perhaps you're one of those women who'd rather be caught dead than (clothed in) red.

But Valentine's Day is around the corner, and there's a way -- even for those of us who rarely include this eye-catching color in our wardrobes -- to do the red thing without looking like toddlers, strumpets or worse.

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Food Network star and daytime talk show hostess Rachael Ray wears a Donna Karan gown.

(AP)

PHOTO GALLERY

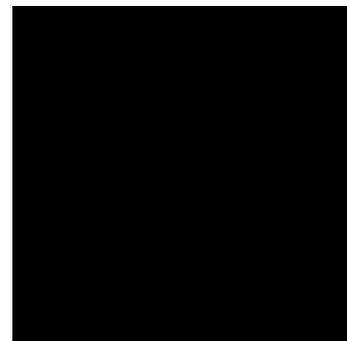
"Red is a powerful color -- it is attractive and brings on excitement," says Kristi Kelley, wardrobe director of the Image Studios, a consulting business in Chicago's West Loop. "It's a great color, but you don't want it to be overpowering."

At work, says Kelley, that may mean trading that heart-splashed novelty sweater for a black suit with red pinstripes, or by wearing just the sweater or shell of a red twinset. The last thing you want is "all-over red with red accessories, red handbags and red shoes."

Even diluted reds like pinks and roses can work magic on Feb. 14, says Kelley. "Not a full pink suit, but maybe a pink blouse under a brown suit, or navy or gray."

Of course, red takes on different meaning -- and certainly can get a bit racier -- if you're headed for an after-work dinner or bedroom rendezvous with someone special.

"It is the most sensual of all colors,"

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says Leatrice Eiseman, Pantone Color Institute executive director. Her global firm not only forecasts trends but helps design professionals use color effectively. "It is more physiological than psychological. What happens to us when we see the object of our desires? We blush. It is connected to visceral reactions, and that *becomes* psychological."

In Pantone's own surveys, nine out of 10 people say red connotes "sexy." "Everybody understands it is a sexual turn-on," says Eiseman, "which is why lipsticks and nail polishes come from from the red family. If you use red in the bedroom, there's an intended purpose."

A color ripe with meaning

While Eiseman says everyone can *physically* wear red, whether they do depends on "whatever they associate with the color. It definitely is an attention-getter. You have to have the personality or determination" to pull it off.

Folks who flip for red are "more optimistic, outgoing, have an extroverted personality. Or it [represents] what that person would *like* to be."

Just last month, Pantone named deep, spicy "Chili Pepper" the 2007 color of the year. Eiseman, author of *More Alive With Color: Personal Colors -- Personal Style* (Capital Books, \$30), says this hue is "really beautiful without being in your face. People are eating more exotic foods that have more color to them," which gives our palates a jolt. She says America's growing Latino influence, as well as the upcoming 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, also influence our acceptance of, and interest in, the color red (which traditionally represents good luck in Chinese culture).

Not only does red potentially mean power and romance, but in the case of the Red Dress Project, it also means saved lives. Since 2003, the Heart Truth campaign has staged the "Red Dress Collection" runway show during New York's February Fashion Week to boost women's awareness of heart disease, the nation's No. 1 female killer. With 21 top designers clothing 23 celebrities, the show now kicks off the fall preview fashion season, and did last Friday. The dresses will travel around the country to health fairs and other awareness-boosting events this year.

"When we first tested the red dress as an image," says Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide senior vice president Sarah Temple, "we used it as a creative element to show this isn't just a men's disease." She says the show, which includes designers such as Carolina Herrera, Tracy Reese and Zac Posen, "represents the ongoing commitment of the fashion industry" to fighting this killer.

And besides, "nothing attracts like a red dress."

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WEARING RED: DOS & DON'TS

It's one thing to celebrate the Valentine's Day holiday spirit with style and class; quite another to transform yourself into a walking fashion Don't. Some tips on looking sweet, not salty, on Feb. 14.

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AT WORK

DOS

Use color accents: Kristi Kelley of Chicago's Image Studios suggests a red or pink camisole or blouse under a black or gray suit -- or topping a neutral ensemble with a red jacket or blazer, like this jaunty tomato-red one from Chaiken.

Accessorize wisely: You might not want to wear your son's hand-made heart on your sleeve, but adding a "Red Dress Pin" (\$2 plus shipping at www.hearttruth.gov) that helps boost heart disease awareness among women is smart.

DON'TS

Head-to-toe red. Skip the red suit, blouse, stockings and shoes, and instead break things up with some black, navy, or even gray.

Novelty sweaters: That means the loving-hands-at-home knit from Grandma, covered in red and pink hearts, needs to stay in the closet. "It's silly," says Kelley, "and you don't want to compromise your intelligence."

ON A DATE

DOS

Look girly: Even if you're a take-charge chica at work, it's OK to get a little frilly and ruffly -- or get tied up, like this Max Azria dress's shoulder bow.

Wear what you mean: Pantone's Leatrice Eiseman says physiologically, red gets the blood racing, so if you wear vibrant red, "you always take a chance" that your date will assume it's a come-on (and perhaps you intend it to be!).

DON'TS

Too-precious looks: You know the type -- dresses with floppy bows or barrettes and headbands that make you look about 5.

Stiff schoolmarm get-ups: Unless, of course, you intend to send the signal that it's your *last* date. Even if you wear daytime suits, add a soft touch like a camisole before leaving work.

IN THE BEDROOM

DOS

Something lacy: Even if you're not garbed in red, add lace to your after-hours look, such as this \$52 "Very Sexy Lace Teddy" from Victoria's Secret.

Go for broke: Ignore the "red rules" once you reach the bedroom. Your professional cred isn't on the line in here.

DON'TS

Flannel PJs. Or T-shirts, or anything designed solely for comfort. We know it's cold outside, but warm things up inside by baring a little skin.

Sharp edges: Some women like strutting in their 6-inch stilettos, but in general, don't wear ensembles that'll accidentally cut your loved one.

PICKING YOUR (RED) POISON

When choosing your red, Pantone's Leatrice Eiseman says it's all about the balance of hair, skin and eye colors. For tips, check out these three looks from Friday's "Red Dress Collection" runway show in New York, staged annually during Fashion Week to boost heart disease awareness among women.

COOL COLORING

If you're a pale platinum or ash blond with blue eyes -- or a woman of any ethnicity with blue-black hair -- "pull out all the stops" and go for drama. Look for wine-colored reds such as claret or burgundy.

IN-BETWEEN

Can't tell if you're "warm" or "cool?" Says Eiseman: "Those are the people who can wear the true reds, assuming their psyches will allow them." If you're stuck, pull different reds from the rack and look at them together to compare underlying tones.

WARM COLORING

Says Eiseman: "the warmer reds are going to be most flattering for you, anything with a golden undertone." Think brick reds or geranium, as well as other brown-tinged floral shades.

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