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Men in tights

By Matthew Temple
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William Shakespeare must be turning in his gusset. Why? Modern man has taken a shine to those hallmarks of the Elizabethan male, **tights**. Before you ask, the new breed of hose-hitcher is neither a fetishist nor a cross-dresser. For him, it's all about comfort, warmth and health. Honest.

Evidently, increasing numbers of men are turning to women's **tights**, or pantyhose, as an alternative to bulky thermals. For the athletically challenged, **tights** are seen as a chance to enhance sporting performance. Some even believe they can reduce varicose veins and prevent medicine's latest *bête noire*, deep vein thrombosis.

At Canadian online lingerie seller Shapings.com, men account for 85 per cent of women's hosiery sales, many buying a pair of **tights** for their wives and a larger size for themselves (from C\$3.55 to C\$27.95). This is a surprisingly serious trend.

"We knew that men bought women's hosiery, but, like everyone else, we assumed it was for cross-dressing purposes," says Steve Katz, managing partner of Ohio-based G Lieberman & Sons. But when the family-run hosiery business, wanting to reinvent itself as an e-commerce operation after 80 years, commissioned a market survey, it found a groundswell among men for "legwear as a unisex fashion".

As a result, the company created a range of male-only **tights** called Comfilon, for men with what Katz calls "the nylon gene". Available through a discreet-as-a-priest website, all models come with male-friendly features, fly fronts standard, and suitably reserved names such as the top-selling Style 849, a tricky little number in black, priced from \$9.99 to \$14.99.

Launched three years ago, the Comfilon line now sells tens of thousands of pairs a year and there are plans to expand the range.

Just another Stateside foible? No, says Katz. According to him, Comfilon has thousands of British customers, one of whom - businessman Tim Stannard - is happy to speak out for all those men in **tights**, or, as history buffs might call them, suffra-nets.

Stannard, a 56-year-old father of two, says he began wearing hosiery when his work - he runs his own business in Lancashire - forced him to divide his time between a warm office and a tundra-like field site. To keep him warm, his wife bought Stannard a pair of men's thermal **tights**. Ideal for outdoors, they were far too hot for centrally heated interiors.

Unable to face thrice-daily underwear changes, Stannard plumped for the third way, buying himself a pair of women's thick (70 denier, if you must know) black **tights**. "The lady who served me asked about size. When I said they were for me she asked if I was going to rob a bank," he says.



Though Stannard's first hose experience proved unsuccessful - "The **tights** were too thick. The ideal is about 15 or 20 denier" - he soon became a convert.

Warmth is not the only reason men head for the hosiery department. Cyclists such as Lance Armstrong of the US have long been sold on the aerodynamic properties of **tights**, as have wrestlers and increasing numbers of professional runners. But for Steve Newman, 41, the selling point is medical.

When Newman noticed the onset of varicose veins, the US engineer was advised by his doctor to wear support socks. When the elastic band cut into his leg just below the knee, the doctor suggested off-the-shelf **tights** instead - with positive results. "After wearing them for a time, the aching in my legs disappeared," says Newman. Since then, **tights** have become a regular fixture in his wardrobe and his problem veins have all but gone.

What about the more serious DVT? Last year, footwear group Scholl launched its own range of Flight Socks, designed to prevent aviation-induced thromboses by, supposedly, stimulating blood circulation in the legs (¥11.95 to ¥12.99).

However, leading DVT expert Patrick Kesteven, consultant haematologist at Newcastle upon Tyne's Freeman Hospital, says there is little evidence to support claims that hosiery, of any sort, will actually prevent long-haul blood clots.

Support stockings - thigh-length socks that apply pressure to the legs - may prevent some varicose veins from forming and some "sluggish" blood from clotting, and they may reduce the incidence of post-DVT leg-swelling. But Kesteven says there is no hard proof that over-the-counter products offer any benefit.

"The only medical use for **tights** I've seen is to prevent jellyfish stings. Queensland lifesavers wear them over their heads," he says.

Whatever the pros of hose, the biggest problem remains the s-word: stigma. Surely, **tights** are for women - always have been, always will be. Not so, says Aileen Ribeiro, professor of the history of dress at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Tights were, of course, once a male-only preserve, believed to accentuate masculinity, not mock it. In ancient Rome, **tights** were worn exclusively by testosterone-fuelled, burly workers, for whom the toga was an impractical luxury. "Drape garments implied a sort of patrician indolence," says Ribeiro.

By the 14th century, men of all classes wore their **tights** with pride. Improvements in textile manufacture, especially the advent of bias-cutting, led to a closer-fitting hose for those who could afford it, with men competing to see whose **tights** were tightest.

Unfortunately, tunics were also getting shorter and men often unwittingly revealed themselves in ways that caused polite society to gasp. In her book *Dress and Morality* (B.T. Batsford, ¥25), Ribeiro says men's hose at the time provoked "quite a lot of moral comment". Still, **tights** remained an essential menswear item.

So, when women dared to wear them, not under dresses, but alone, as trousers, there was mass hysteria. "There was a big fear of women usurping the male role by wearing anything of this kind, because it would flaunt their sexuality and subvert men's, too," says Ribeiro.

Fast forward 500 years, and it's men's turn to storm the pantyhose barricade. The only problem, for the mainstream hosiery industry, is persuading more men to overcome their modern prejudice and buy **tights**. Atavistic tradition is one thing, but it's a brave 21st century father who asks his children for silkies, not socks on Father's day.

Perhaps the industry needs to rebrand **tights**, to remove their feminine image, and make them more appealing to men. Four years ago, Austrian luxury hosiery company Wolford tried. It launched a men's range, with the anatomically curious name "Waist-sock", which has been reasonably successful (¥52/\$98).

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But Robert Safko, owner of Shapings.com, does not think obfuscation is the right approach. He believes manufacturers wishing to tap into the male market must devise a name for **tights** that implies strength and endurance. His own choice: Men's Power Skin.

TIGHT CORNERS> Comfilon Men's Legwear, PO Box 193, Granville, Ohio (+1 740-587 2860); <http://www.comfilon.com/>> Shapings, inquiries: +1 905-627 2898; <http://www.shapings.com/>> Wolford, in the UK: inquiries: 020-7935 9202; in the US: 619 Madison Avenue, New York (+1 212-688 4850); <http://www.wolford.com/>> Scholl, inquiries: 0161-654 3097, <http://www.flightsocks.com/>>

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