

SUSTAINABILITY

Is 'Clean' Fashion About to Have a Moment?

With clean beauty now mainstream, an emerging wave of brands are promoting skin-kind clothing made from natural fibres and without the use of harsh chemicals, seeking to tap into consumer interest in products that promise health and wellness benefits.



LA-based designer Don Kaka is among a cohort of brands designing garments made from natural materials and without chemical treatments. (Don Kaka)

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When Vinnie Genomal was a kid and struggling with severe eczema, doctors had some fashion advice they said would help: Wear 100 percent cotton. His skin would be much happier in natural, breathable fabrics, rather than plastic synthetics like polyester, the theory went.

That was a tall order, as his dad, a veteran of the textile industry, pointed out after one appointment. Most clothes, even ones made using natural fibres, like cotton, are covered in chemicals from dyes and treatments that confer anti-creasing, stain resistance or other desirable properties. The kind of clothing the doctors were recommending didn't really exist, Genomal recalled his dad saying.

It's a problem he's spent almost two decades trying to solve together with his brother Nikhiel. In 2008, they founded Cottonique, a clothing brand whose products they say are non-toxic, hypoallergenic and made from unadulterated cotton.

Companies like Cottonique are part of an emerging wave of "clean" fashion brands promising consumers skin-kind and chemical-free clothing options. Though the movement is still fringe, it's tapping into a surging market for health and wellness-related products that's already propelled a boom in areas like clean beauty.

"We see ourselves in a very early phase of growing awareness towards chemicals and clothing," Genomal said.

Toxic Fashion

Concerns that chemical treatments and synthetic fabrics in clothing could harm human health have been bubbling up for years, though the issue remains under-researched. Still, a succession of investigations by academics, advocates, media and policymakers have begun to draw more attention to the topic.

Some studies have found the hormone-disrupting chemical BPA in sportswear and other clothing. More recently, testing on clothing sold by e-commerce sites Temu, Shein and AliExpress revealed some items contained high levels of toxic substances. Meanwhile, regulators in Europe and the US have moved to crack down on the use of so-called "forever chemicals," or PFAS, a group of toxic substances that never break down and that have been linked to health risks including reproductive issues and cancer. They've also commonly been used in apparel to imbue fabrics with stain resistance and waterproofing.

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"Fashion has many of the same chemicals and materials that people are concerned about in food packaging and homes and beauty products," said Alden Wicker, a journalist and author of "To Dye For," a book about the health risks associated with unregulated chemicals in clothing. "It's not exempt from the concerns about all those other things."

To be sure, more research is needed to establish how readily chemicals in clothing that have yet to be regulated are absorbed into the body and the issue is not exactly mainstream. Nonetheless, a growing niche of consumers are starting to pay attention to the issue, concerned what they wear may be aggravating skin conditions or harming their health.

Wicker said she's heard from shoppers who worry they're having a reaction to the polyester clothing they're wearing. The most read post on her website, EcoCult.com, **delves into brands that sell plastic-free athletic wear** and specifically explains what to look for when shopping for that kind of athleisure. Last year, the story had 65,000 views, Wicker said.

'You Can't Get Away From This Stuff'

Last year, LA-based fashion designer Don Kaka set out to design a new collection of exercise gear using only natural fibres. It hasn't been easy. Most gym wear relies on synthetics for stretch, for instance. Even after Kaka settled on making his yoga gear from cotton and wool instead of materials like polyester, he struggled to find yarn fine enough that it didn't require chemical treatments to make it softer.

"It's like you can't get away from this stuff," Kaka said. "It's everywhere."

Untreated materials are also costlier, meaning his yoga clothes are some of the most expensive on the market, he said. That's a turn off for some consumers, but lowering the prices wouldn't allow him to turn a profit, he added.

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Regulation is also pushing bigger brands to tighten up chemical management and find replacements for some hazardous substances. **Even that's a challenge.** Patagonia said it spent 15 years working on a way to make its products without PFAS. Doing so "without compromising performance was harder than we imagined," it **said** in a blog post laying out its efforts to eliminate the chemicals as of this year.

Getting rid of chemicals altogether is impossible, experts say. "There is a constant drive to make things better," said Phil Patterson, a textile and chemicals consultant who chairs the council in charge of developing restricted substance guidelines at Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals, a widely used industry initiative focused on responsible chemical management. "Anybody who talks about chemical-free ... it doesn't exist. Everything's a chemical."

'Skin-First' Fashion

As with “clean” beauty, what constitutes “clean” fashion is **somewhat vague**. Broadly speaking, brands playing in the space are promoting products made from natural fibres and without the use of “toxic” chemicals. Though still niche, more businesses are popping up to service the market.

Spain-based manufacturer Pyratex has spent the last decade working to develop fabrics that can mimic the properties of synthetic textiles using natural fibres. Its offerings range from regenerative cotton to seaweed-based fabrics. Its goal is to create a company focused on “super textiles” akin to super foods, said Niharika Shetty, brand collaboration coordinator for the company.

One of Pyratex’s newer customers is British stylist Tallulah Harlech who launched Sylva, a luxury fashion line focused on skin health, last year. Sylva’s positioning as a “skin first” brand is personal to Harlech, who grew up with her own skin condition. Her goal was to make clothes using fabrics that were not only responsibly sourced, but that would perform better from a dermatological perspective than more traditional options, she said.

“This is becoming more of a known issue,” Harlech said of various fabrics’ effects on people’s skin.

At a time when brands promoting more responsible or climate-friendly products are often struggling to penetrate, some see this skin-friendly, health oriented messaging as an opportunity to boost engagement.

People aren’t going to just stop shopping, said Jeff Garner, a fashion designer who works with natural fibres and plant-based dyes. He’s emerged as a prominent advocate against the use of chemicals in clothing, co-producing “Let Them Be Naked,” a documentary focused on fashion’s negative impacts on human health through the toxins and chemicals used in making clothes.

“Give [consumers] a selfish reason to change,” he said, referring to consumers’ health.