The 5 Most Lethal Articles of Clothing

By Maggie Gamble
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I Thought...

What do you think?
Looking sophisticated comes with a price.

Admit it; we’ve all succumbed to the burning desire to be like everyone else once or twice. We all change, as does the world around us, as does style. Those trendy new shorts you purchased a couple months ago? It looked great on you, but would you still buy it if it could potentially harm you? Kill you even?

This book is all about that, from the organ-constricting corset to mercury exposing top hats. Also, next time you try something on, make sure it won’t drive you crazy or give you pneumonia.
Corsets and Tight lacing

EXTREMITY: Thousands of unsuspecting women were inflicted by this unpleasant garment, in various ways.
WHERE: Europe and Britain were the centre of the corset’s immense popularity.
WHEN: Corsets were first fashionable during 16th century Europe, and have been worn since 2000BC.
INVENTOR: Roxey Ann Caplin was born in Canada in 1793 and later relocated to Britain, where she became an esteemed inventor/writer of Health and Beauty. She was awarded by receiving a medal of “Manufacturer, Designer and Inventor” in 1851. She died on the 2nd of August in 1888.

We all have a certain way we wish to be, to look, to act. There are many tactics to achieving this goal; some physical, some mental, and corsetry is one of those ways. Corsetry, distinctly different from the modern term “waist training”, has been around for centuries, a method used by many women who wish to be of a certain physique. There are some beneficial aspects of wearing a corset, like losing weight, but the following article focus’ on one question: how did the corset manage to kill so many women, and deform several others?
Corsetry and Tight lacing

What Made It Lethal

The corset had many ways to affect someone, whether it negative or positive. It could affect people with illnesses, deformities and death.

The corset could cause malfunctions in one’s lungs, stomach, liver and muscles. Corsetry sometimes caused constriction of the lungs, so when the wearer inhaled, the lower lobes of the lungs wouldn’t fully expand. This tightness wasn’t healthy for one’s lungs; it caused too much pressure and strain. If one’s corset was tight-laced to the limit, there’s also the possibility of broken ribs.

Doctors of a couple centuries ago thought that certain corsets could prevent one’s stomach from functioning properly. If so, it could lead to indigestion. Also, corsets may have made it challenging for one to consume a decent sized meal.

Corsetry had an abundance of complications when it came to one’s liver. The liver could become enlarged because of the pressure and displacement of one’s ribs, though corsets would merely squeeze it, not seriously damaging it. One’s muscles could also be affected; lower-back pain and loss of muscle tissue. Tight lacing could weaken the muscles of one’s midriff too.

Materials

Time to go inside the killer’s mind, or rather, its fabric.

Like the crinoline, another piece of clothing in the top 5, the corset sometimes used whalebone in order to keep the stiffness of the bodice. The front of the bodice was then stiffened again by the addition of a busk, which could be made of wood, ivory, horn, metal or whalebone. Then the busk would be shaped into a thin strip and placed into the bodice. Lace held the corset’s components together, which made it convenient to be removed or replaced.

“Health Corsets” became popular during the late 19th century. The “health corset” was made more resilient, and was made of wool. It was known as being resilient and durable, having flexibility. Dr. Gustav Jaeger, the inventor, had intended to make a more advantageous type of corset, and had declared that the “health corset’s” fabric had cured him of health problems.

Quick Fact

The most probable first image of a corset was took in approximately 2000BC.

What Were They Thinking

It was the norm to be, or to thrive to be slender yet shapely, with a narrow waist that signified femininity. It’s probable that women were pressured to be a certain way, and criticized if they were seen as being unconventional, or different. No one should be shamed for being a certain way, and it’s preposterous that so many women thought it was necessary to wear clothing that could literally suck the life out of someone.
EXTREMITY: Inorganic mercury in the form of mercuric nitrate inflicted neurological damage and erethism, a neurological disorder on many workers in top hat manufacturing.

WHERE: Factory workers were first susceptible to mercury vapours in 17th century France, then England.

WHEN: The exposure of mercury to people working in factories that made top hats mostly occurred during the 1800s and 1900s, when production was more laborious for factory workers.

INVENTOR: The first top hat of England was fabricated by George Dunnage, though many people have fallaciously believed it was a man named John Hetherington.

Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland is a very unique novel, featuring an ill-tempered queen of hearts, a hookah-smoking caterpillar, and an idiosyncratic Mad Hatter. The Mad Hatter, a secondary character in the book, was an eccentric and strange man, but did anyone ever ask why he was so peculiar? Was it because he drank too much tea, was tone incongruent for him, or possibly the effects of mercury poisoning?
Top Hats

What Made It Lethal

Well, we don’t use the term “mad as a hatter” for nothing.

During the 17th and 19th century inorganic mercury was used frequently for felt, a material found in top hats. In carrottting, a process that ensures good quality top hats, there is a solution to help smooth out the furs from small animals, matting them together. This solution contains mercuric nitrate, and when workers came in contact with it, they were putting their lives at risk.

Mercury exposure can cause neurological disorders, as mentioned previously, mental disorientation and muscular weakness. Red fingers, toes and cheeks are all symptoms of mercury exposure, though the more severe symptoms include bleeding from the ears or mouth, loss of teeth, hair and nails, deficient memory and tremors. Overall, mercury exposure has caused acute neurological damage on many people working in hat-making factories.

Materials

Though there were other materials, at that period in history the material factory workers used to produce top hats was called felt. Felt hats are made of an abundance of animal fibers, like silk, hair/fur and wool. The animal fibers in felt are twisted, kneaded and manipulated by hot water and steam to make the material. Felt is a very strong fabric, hence that each individual fiber is interlinked in every possible direction with many other fibers.

Quick Fact

During the 20th century there was an inspection of 25 hat-making firms, and it was disclosed that 25% of 1589 hatters carried a mercurial disease.

What Were They Thinking

Did the personnel of the hat-making factories know that exposing themselves to mercury could severely damage their nervous systems? Perhaps job opportunities were scarce for the lower class of society. Maybe they were left with no choice but to take what they got. If they did know of the dreadful effects of mercury on the human body, why did they continue working there? Would working as a hat-maker in extremely unhygienic circumstances really be worth it?
The Arsenic Dress

EXTREMITY: Several people, both men and women, wore the green material that contained an arsenic-based dye which caused agonizing physical torment and death.
WHERE: As Queen Victoria reigned in Britain, arsenic laced clothing was being worn as well.
WHEN: Items and articles of clothing that contained the chemical dye were used during the Victorian Era, in the 19th and 18th centuries, also in the late 17th century.
INVENTOR: To this day, the individual who started this lethal trend is anonymous, as it was most likely discovered spontaneously, and not deliberately.

Some people’s favorite colors are red, or orange, maybe violet. What about green? There are unique green eyes, emerald earrings, cupcakes with mint colored frosting, or perhaps a couple of shimmering green dresses that carry an arsenic-based dye. Green is a lovely color... in most situations.
The Arsenic Dress

What Made It Lethal

The 19th and 18th centuries were filled with strange clothing trends, but none were quite as distinctive as this choice.

People would use the green pigment to dye their dresses a lovely emerald color, though the effects it had on employees of flower shops weren’t as pleasant. Many young women that worked with artificially colored clothes and decorative items, which resulted in them wearing bandages on their hands to cover the sores caused by the arsenic-based dye. In one case, a young girl’s face was swollen to the point where she was practically blind.

An organization inspected some flower shops, to study the effects of the chemical dye, and they concluded that an average headdress held a sufficient amount of arsenic to poison 20 people. A professional chemist discovered that a ball gown made from 20 yards of green tarlatan fabric would contain 900 grains of arsenic, and nearly 60 grains would powder off. If one thought that 60 grains of 900 isn’t dangerous, they must think again; 4 or 5 grains are lethal for an adult.

Materials

The dresses and other articles of clothing contained a mixture of an arsenic-based dye and copper. There were many other dangerous colorants as well, though none were as lethal as the green chemical dye. The typical materials in ball gowns used in the 19th century were satin, silk, taffeta and velvet, plus the occasional artificial fabric. Ball gowns sometimes featured intricate decorations and designs, like lace, pearls, sequins, embroidery and ruffles.

Many prestigious women were designated as murderers; it was they who wore the green dresses, though they didn’t suffer greatly like the women and children who made the dresses. There were also many female activists whose intention was to warn the British population, especially the people who made things with the chemical dye, of the perils of using the pigment.

Altogether, the toxic green pigment tainted the air, water and ground with pollution, and sickened many flower makers. It caused blisters throughout one’s body, and if left on the floor it would kill rodents. The flower maker’s hands had damaged tissue. Their fingernails and hands were green or yellow.

When absorbed into one’s skin, arsenic-based dyes are proven to be exceedingly detrimental internally and externally.

Quick Fact

The toxic arsenic-based dye was also used in candles, curtains and wallpaper.

What Were They Thinking

After people conducted investigations to know the effects of the dye, and the results were that yes, the dye was influencing the flower makers negatively, did the public continue to use the dye? Did the disclosure of the true components abolish the dye’s popularity altogether? Before using a dye or anything related, isn’t it necessary to take precautions? When buying and using a new product, checking to see if it contains a blood-poisoning chemical is a good idea. Some say beauty comes with a price, and in some ways they are right.
The Muslin Dress

EXTREMITY: The muslin dress caused a pneumonia epidemic, which was later named “the muslin disease”.

WHERE: Muslin was worn and produced in Asia, particularly India. In ancient times it was traded and imported to European countries, like Italy, Greece and France.

WHEN: The muslin dress was quite popular during the late 18th and 19th centuries.

INVENTOR: Muslin, a material, has been around for centuries, so the first person to make muslin remains anonymous, though many famous and important figures in history have used it, such as Marco Polo and Marie Antoinette.

Sometimes people go to certain measures to achieve a look. Some people know what they are doing is risky, while others don’t anticipate any danger at all.

The muslin dress seemed perfectly harmless...until it caused an epidemic that killed many people. What’s so dangerous about a dress, you say? Read the following article, and you’ll see.
The Muslin Dress

What Made It Lethal
In hot and humid countries, like India or France, women wore the muslin dress for a couple reasons. Muslin is a breathable, light material while being elegant and lovely. Plus, once the women had drenched themselves in water, it would accentuate their figure.

In France’s Revolutionary epoch lower class women were prohibited from wearing clothing more than 3.5KG. Muslin would have been a good choice, being a light fabric.

Though the muslin dress was comfortable and convenient, it wasn’t proper attire for cold temperatures. The wet, thin material was too weak and unsuitable for extreme temperatures, which resulted in many women contracting severe cases of pneumonia and the flu. Making it worse, the medicine industry wasn’t as advanced in the previous centuries, so it would have been hard to fight off other illnesses.

Materials
The muslin dress was made of what it was named after its name exactly; muslin. Muslin is a cotton fabric of plain weave, which is the most basic type of weave. It forms an easily understood crisscross pattern, less complex than the alternatives, satin weave and twill. Muslin was handwoven in Bangladesh and West Bengal, then imported to Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries.

What Were They Thinking
In countries where the weather can drastically change from hot to cold, people should consider their clothing choices. Like whether or not your dress is going to give you pneumonia.

Did anyone even suspect that the dress would lead to such a disastrous situation?

Considering that clothing over 3.5KG was reserved for upper-class citizens, one could only assume that many poverty-stricken people wore muslin. It would be more likely for people living in poverty to die, rather than the rich, who would have had more access to medicine and sufficient living circumstances. It’s also doubtful that the lower-class even had that many options, if they weren’t allowed to wear heavy articles of clothing.

Quick Fact
There’s a legend that in Ancient Rome an ounce of muslin would sell for an ounce of gold.
Crinoline

EXTREMITY: Globally, more than 39,927 people died of incidents that involved crinoline.
WHERE: The crinoline was well known throughout the world; Europe, the U.S., the U.K. and most likely in Canada too.
WHEN: The crinoline was most popular during the 19th century, though it existed prior to that time.
INVENTOR: R.C. Milliet of Besancon invented the first steel-hooped cage crinoline in April of 1856, in Paris, France.

During the year of 1863, in Santiago, Chile, a couple thousand people perished in a church fire. The gas lamps on the walls lit the window veils to flames, causing everyone to rush to the exits in disorientation and panic. Something rather bizarre stopped them... It was the women's colossal dresses that had the circumference of a trampoline, which ultimately killed them. But that was only one of the incidents that occurred.
Crinoline

What Made It Lethal

Apparently, women in the 1800s were obligated to look appealing and proper, and they went through extremities to obtain that look.

The crinoline, a structured underdress made to hold out women’s skirts, was lethal because of its unrealistic circumference. They could be as large as 216” in circumference! That’s 6 yards! Its size was dangerous in a sense that it could become entangled in things, like the wheels of carriages, which would presumably drag the wearer down the street.

Wearing a crinoline also resulted in fires multiple times in history, when women’s dresses caught fire because of its width. Since they didn’t have as much access to electricity during this period, it was all the more likely for dresses to catch fire. The majority of the population used candles, lanterns, fireplaces and other sources of fire that would practically ensure an unfortunate situation.

What Were They Thinking

Clearly these women were not thinking of what wearing a ginormous hoop-skirt could entail. Some may think that it’s slightly ironic that such a seemingly harmless thing that’s supposed to enhance beauty could be sufficient to kill.

The circumference of the crinoline could be unrealistically large: why would anyone want to carry around the dress’ fabric and the crinoline’s weight?

The most unbelievable aspect of crinoline-related deaths were that there was accessible flame-resistant fabrics, but women rarely chose to wear them because they were seen as unfashionable. Did women feel pressured to wear this cage-like invention, or did they thoroughly enjoy it? We may never know what was running through their heads.

Quick Fact

An estimated 3000 women were designated deceased in the 1850s and 1860s by crinoline-related incidents.
Here are the criteria I used in ranking the most lethal articles of clothing.

The article of clothing:
- Caused the deaths of hundreds of people
- Had strange effects on the wearer
- Was ridiculously bad for one’s body
- Had extreme effects

What do you think?
1. Do you agree with my ranking? If you don’t, try ranking them yourself. Justify your ranking with data. You may use my criteria or you may use your own.

2. Here are others to consider: footbinding, the fontage, and the high collar. Find out more about them. Should they have made my list? Are there others that should be considered?