

When Dressing Is a Challenge

BY CHRISTINA BINKLEY

It may seem like there couldn't possibly be an unanswered need for more clothes, but the fashion industry is waking up to one: millions of people whose advanced age or disabilities make difficult the simple act of getting dressed.

Until recently, elderly people whose arthritis prevented them from buttoning shirts had few places to turn, other than a caregiver who could help them dress. Children in leg braces and adults with nervous-system and muscular diseases had clothing altered or custom-made. But necessity breeds invention, and a growing number of designers are creating apparel to meet those needs.

Called adaptive apparel, the clothes address the difficulty of getting dressed when you can't close buttons, zip pants, reach into a rear pocket or shrug on a shirt. Tommy Hilfiger recently launched a line for children that includes chinos, jeans, dresses and shirts with easy-close magnetic buttons

and adjustable seams.

Two of the six best-selling items recently on Tommy.com were from the adaptive-apparel collection. The company says 20% of the Tommy Hilfiger children's business was driven by the line. "There was a void in the market," Mr. Hilfiger says.

Wal-Mart carries adaptive jeans that have easily reachable angled pockets on the thigh, instead of rear pockets that can irritate wheelchair users' skin. The jeans were created by Los Angeles-based ABL Denim, whose founder, Stephanie Alves, three years ago sought to create denim that her wheelchair-bound stepsister could wear. The jeans, which have rear waistbands set higher to offset the creep-down effect of being seated, aim at style as well as practicality.

The new apparel options have emerged in part because it is easier for designers to reach consumers directly online. They are being spurred on by the wishes of shoppers with disabilities to dress as fashionably as the able-bodied and to live independently.

About 19 million Americans

have difficulty walking or climbing stairs, U.S. Census figures show. The elderly population in the U.S. is expected to nearly double to 84 million by 2050 from 43 million in 2012, according to the U.S. Commerce Department. Also, people are living longer, and more independently, with nervous-system and muscular disorders.

After the late North Carolina State football coach Don Horton was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, his wife, Maura Horton, invented an office-ready shirt and pants he could get into on his own when traveling with the team. "One of the things that keep you independent is your ability to get dressed," says Ms. Horton. Her MagnaReady line of shirts, with hidden magnetic closures, is sold online for men and women.

MagnaReady closures are used in Tommy Hilfiger's adaptive-apparel collection. PVH Corp., which owns the Hilfiger brand as well as Calvin Klein and other apparel lines, recently licensed Ms. Horton's magnetic-button shirts for a new line. The Van Heusen brand will test dress shirts with adaptive technology this fall at a number of retailers online, a PVH spokeswoman said, with a larger rollout expected for spring 2017.

PVH's Tommy Hilfiger has been working with Runway of Dreams, an organization that aims to get apparel makers to modify clothes with easier closures, adjustable sleeve and leg lengths, and alternative ways to get in or out.

After seeing the difficulties of a caregiver changing her mother in a nursing home, Molly Dye designed trousers that would offer more coverage and accessibility. The result was CareZips, slacks with three zippers at the sides and crotch, placed so that a resting body doesn't press on them and create bedsores.

A three-year-old program called Open Style Labs, operating at the MIT International Design Center in Cambridge, Mass., groups students from engineering, fashion-design and occupational-therapy courses to create clothes to address a wide variety of needs. These include flat seams that don't irritate the skin of children with sensory disorders and rain coats that cover wheelchair users' laps more effectively.

ON STYLE



Clockwise from top left, a MagnaReady shirt's magnetic closure, ABL Denim jeans for wheelchair users and a Tommy Hilfiger Runway of Dreams T-shirt.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MAGNAREADY; CHRISTOPHER VOELKER/ABL DENIM; TOMMY HILFIGER