

FASHION

The Spanx Experiment

Thanks to a new line of **TONING UNDERGARMENTS**, guys, too, are getting into shape(wear). Our writer gave them a try and lived — just barely — to tell about it.

SO THIS IS HOW IT ENDS: STRANGLING by Spanx. This is what I'm thinking as I ram through the door of my closet and stumble into a long hallway. I'm alone in the house and barely dressed. A Spanx for Men Zoned Performance Undershirt has adhered to the top of my head. I'm holding part of the shirt with both hands, just inches in front of my neck. The shirt is 92 percent nylon, 8 percent spandex/elastane and as tight as Saran Wrap. As I twist my way down the hall, I'm unable to summon enough strength to pull it down over my shoulders. I'm certain the thing is about to snap my windpipe.

Of course a man would get himself into such a predicament. The Zoned Performance Undershirt came with an instruction card outlining a simple process for putting it on. I ignored these instructions, because what man needs an instruction card on how to put on a T-shirt?

These types of clothing complications are nothing new for women. If my woman's studies class in college taught me one thing (and I'm sure it must have), it was this: For centuries, women have stockpiled an arsenal of underattire designed to squish them into shape. Now, men can join women in this long struggle, thanks to Spanx. The 10-year-old Atlanta-based company, which has something of a cult following among women who love its stretchy shapewear, introduced its first line of men's products last year. Some of the offerings, like the Cotton Compression Undershirts, are slightly tighter and slicker than your average tee. Others, like the Zoned Performance line of shirts, look like clothes made for little kids. Or teddy bears.

The teddy bear shirt is the one that's about to kill me. I contemplate escape. Could I dislocate my shoulder and free myself like Mel Gibson got out of that straitjacket in *Lethal Weapon 2*? Probably not.



But that's starting to sound like a good idea, which means I must be about to pass out from oxygen deprivation. I decide to try a strength move. I bend at the knees, let out a scream and, like a Bulgarian weightlifter in the clean-and-jerk, muscle the shirt the rest of the way over my head and down my shoulders. A couple of deep breaths and a few more wriggles later, and I have the shirt pulled all the way down to my waist. I check my reflection in the mirror. Shocking. My flab has been flattened, my love handles lessened. I pull on a pair of jeans. They slide back



down. I have to buckle my belt one notch tighter to hold them in the proper place. This is a midriff miracle.

OK, SO MAYBE YOU DON'T CONSIDER GAINING one belt notch a miracle. And, to be sure, no one at Spanx is promising supernatural results from their men's line, which includes boxer briefs and briefs as well as several kinds of undershirts. "The shirts make about a three- to five-pound difference in appearance," Spanx founder Sara Blakely tells me.

Still, that's a lot for me. I do not consider myself fat, but I'm nowhere near svelte. I cook, you see. Quite well. And I love wine. Far too much. So I am constantly battling with those three, five or nine extra pounds — all of which seem to collect right at my waistline.

While I do dress to conceal my perceived flaws, I had never considered shapewear a viable option. But since it launched last spring, Spanx for Men has been a sales phenomenon, far surpassing the company's expectations. For instance, the Cotton Compression Undershirt, which retails for around \$55, quickly sold out nationwide at high-end retailers like Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom. Following the product's launch, there was a six-week waiting list on Spanx's website.

But surely it's women who are buying these as gifts (and a little payback) for their men, right? Wrong. Blakely says men are buying the products for themselves, even though the name on the box is Spanx, the very same brand that's a favorite of the fictional Liz Lemon and the real-life Oprah Winfrey.

"We spent a year thinking of other names for these products," Blakely says. "But in the end, we decided that 'Spanx' stands for 'shaping' in the marketplace. And we've found that men don't mind at all."

FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STORY, I HAVE been taking the entire line of Spanx for Men products out for a spin. This begins literally with me spinning around the hallway of my home, trying to stay alive long enough to put on the Zoned Performance shirt. Days later, after carefully reading all the instructions,

I put the Cotton Compression shirt on, under a sweatshirt. While hosting a dinner party, I don the Cotton Compression tank and Cotton Comfort briefs under a zippered sweater and wool pants. For a business meeting, I wear the Zoned Performance V-neck shirt and Cotton Comfort Boxer Briefs under a suit.

Despite the fact that I love my sleek new physique, there are some downsides to this type of downsizing. At the business meeting, I reach into my dress shirt to adjust the Zoned Performance tee. I manage to pull it away from my skin briefly, and it snaps back in place. The resulting pop is loud enough to garner the attention of my associates, who eye me suspiciously. At the travel clinic where I receive a round of vaccines prior to leaving the country for an assignment, I forget that I'm wearing the Cotton Compression Undershirt. Upon seeing me in the clingy contraption, the nurse makes no eye contact with me for the rest of my visit.

Later that day, I wonder whether the other men who are buying Spanx feel the same kind of embarrassment when someone sees them sans cravat. Apparently not. Blakely says she knows some men — extremely fit men — who wear their Spanx out on the town, with no shirts to cover them. This, to me, would be like a woman wearing tights with no pants. But then, that happens these days.

So maybe I shouldn't be embarrassed. After all, the products work. In addition to flattening my stomach a bit, the shirts push the fat that has collected at my sides toward my back. The result: a straighter, leaner appearance that reminds me to stand and sit up straight. (The underwear works, too, although it's used less for shaping and more for, well, control.)

Still, I wonder: Isn't it a form of deception when a guy wears Spanx? Sure, women have long donned corsets and girdles and Wonderbras and Spanx under their clothes.

But women also wear heels that change the shape of their legs, and they wear makeup, and they color their hair and make all kinds of other alterations that men typically don't. Blakely explains, though, that she's not selling deception; her products won't turn beer bellies into six-packs. She's selling T-shirts to men who want something that won't bulge under their shirts and sweaters and that won't lose its shape after dozens of wears. And she's selling underwear to men who want to "keep everything together."

"It has become much more mainstream and acceptable for men to care about how they look," she says. "And a lot of men who are buying the shirts are already fit, svelte, well-dressed men."

I feel anything but fit or svelte after indulging in the six-course meal I cooked for a dinner party while wearing Spanx. And yet, that's when my breakthrough occurs. At the end of the meal, I make an announcement: "So, I'm wearing Spanx ... for men."

One of the guests, a guy, says, "You're wearing a girdle." Another guest, a women's rights

activist, says, "Welcome to the club." She insists on seeing my Cotton Compression tank top. I reluctantly unzip my sweater to show off the top half. She responds by showing me the outline of the Spanx she's wearing. Two pairs, actually: There's a top holding her in at the sides and another garment that's pulling up everything below the waist. The two items meet somewhere in the middle.

I'm shocked. This is not a person I would expect to care about conforming to societal standards for, well, sucking it in.

"You wear Spanx?" I ask.

"Yeah, man," she answers. "There's no shame in it. You have to look good."

She's right. Whether you're a man or a woman, if it makes you look better, who cares about a little squeezing? Just one word of caution: Read the instructions first.

"It has become much more mainstream and acceptable for men to care about how they look."

JOSEPH GUINTO, a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C., wrote this story while wearing Spanx.