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FASHION

Could antiviral fabrics take off with luxury shoppers?

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A leading Italian manufacturer has perfected an antiviral fabric, one of the first of its kind. *Vogue Business* unpicks the potential.

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Can your clothing protect you from Covid-19? A leading Italian luxury manufacturer says it has developed an antiviral fabric that may, and major luxury brands are snapping it up.

Albini Group, best known as a dress shirt fabric supplier to companies including Kering, Armani, Ermenegildo Zegna and Prada, has developed new ViroFormula fabrics, created in collaboration with Swiss textile innovation firm HeiQ, in which chemicals are applied to the textiles during production in a process similar to waterproofing. Tests on a virus similar to Covid-19 called 229E (testing on Covid-19 is currently restricted) proved the treated material can likely destroy coronaviruses a few minutes after contact. Other strains should behave similarly, according to HeiQ.

Antibacterial treatment of clothing was already relatively widespread before the Covid-19 outbreak, marketed as a way consumers could critically reduce the frequency of washing their [clothes](#) but the pandemic has hastened demand for its protective qualities. Albini is the first major luxury fashion player to enter this sphere, with [Grado](#) in India and [Sonovia](#) in Israel among the firms now also marketing similar treatments for clothing.

While the tests are proving that these treated materials can likely destroy coronaviruses a few minutes after contact, what is less clear is how this and other novel technologies such as antimicrobial surfaces can impact a person's overall chances of catching the illness.

Autoinoculation, where a person puts the virus into their own body after touching a contaminated surface, is generally considered to be a secondary route of infection for coronaviruses like Covid-19. Far more common is the airborne transmission of the virus through inhaling droplets after someone has sneezed or coughed. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence that clothing is still a transmission route for viruses, with multiple studies showing that infectious material can linger on fabrics.

Albini Group is best known as a dress shirt fabric supplier, but is now producing antiviral fabric.

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As well as the challenge of proving a product's efficacy, manufacturers must also produce fabrics attractive enough that consumers want to purchase. Albini says its new antiviral fabrics have the same look and feel of its other luxury materials, and it has already received orders from leading luxury firms, though it declined to name them. With no definitive end in sight for the Covid-19 pandemic, fashion brands may look to join what could be a lucrative market in protective consumer gear.

“The fact that my travel suit is not just good for avoiding wrinkles, but also protects me from viruses... this is a feature that is very nice-to-have,” says Albini CEO, Fabio Tamburini, who believes that antiviral protection may become a regular feature on clothing in the coming decade.

Some of his biggest clients have already made sampling orders, initially to produce garments that work alongside the personal protective equipment they are now supplying to healthcare workers. The intention is to produce shirts and other everyday items that medical professionals could wear underneath or after changing out of their hospital gear. Others have enquired about using the technology to create uniforms that can protect brands' workforces as stores and factories reopen. Albini believes the consumer market is likely to be financially rewarding in the long term, given what he expects to be ongoing concerns about viral transmission.

“We believe that consumer demand for this kind of product and material innovation is already there,” says Emily Gordon-Smith, director of consumer product at trend forecasting firm Stylus. “And it will grow exponentially in the next year or two — so it's something that brands need to be looking at.”

The technology, developed by Albini and HeiQ, works by targeting the fatty chromosomes that surround viruses when they touch the fabric, destroying them within a matter of minutes. The most significant drawback is impermanence. The HeiQ tests show the solution will be deactivated after 30 washes, though Tamburini hopes to develop a means of retreating clothing to restore the antiviral properties when necessary.

Tamburini's recommendation to clients is that the product is treated as added protection, rather than fully blocking infection. “This is something that protects you much more, but it's not enough. You still have to wash your hands, wear your face mask and do... social distancing.”

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