

NYLON STOCKINGS

Before 1960, all women wore nylon stockings but by 1970 very few women wore them. Pantyhose and tights became the norm and now stockings are rarely worn. History has it that the first movie showing a woman putting on stockings is *The Blue Angel* (1930) starring Marlene Dietrich. Another famous movie involving stockings is *The Graduate* starring Anne Bancroft. Stockings have always had a sex appeal about them, no matter what they were made of; silk, rayon, cotton, or nylon.

In 1937, Dupont developed the first purely synthetic fiber. This new silk like fiber was more than a replacement for silk. It was stronger than silk and its fiber properties could be changed in manufacturing. There are stories on how DuPont came up with names for this new fiber but the final name became NYLON. During the development stages of nylon, reports and stories circulated on how wonderful the fiber was. DuPont worked with knitting mills to test the knitting ability of nylon to make stockings. Rumors of hosiery that wore like iron went throughout the country and people began to take this as fact. Stockings made from nylon were first displayed at the 1939 World's Fair and this began the world's love of nylon stockings. One reporter said, "Stockings made from nylon are soft and diaphanous." The hosiery industry was worried women would be disappointed that nylon stockings did in fact run and not last forever. After a few test market sales, the first national sale of nylon stockings occurred on May 15, 1940 and millions of nylon stockings were sold just in a few days. Known as Nylon Mania, never before had a consumer item caused such nationwide pandemonium.

The flat knitting process of monofilament nylon (gossamer) creates a silky and shiny non-stretch material. To make Full Fashion nylon stockings, a seamstress (seaming machinist) had to sew the ends of a flat piece of knitted and shaped nylon together. This created the seam and contour of a leg. The needle marks, also called fashion marks, came from the needles that held the material in place while it was sewn. A hole in the top of the stocking, called a finishing hole, was formed when the seamstress turned the stocking to finish the stitching. Next the stocking was boarded, which means shaped by steam heat on a board that resembled a leg. Since the original knitting machines were temperamental, the quality of stockings varied on each run. The term First Quality became the standard for what a manufacturer felt was their product line. Irregular was a stocking that was just below their standard, maybe the color was off or the stocking was a little shorter or longer than normal. For the most part, Irregular was just as good of quality as First Quality. Seconds and Thirds were the stockings that have obvious flaws.

Millions and millions of stockings were sold before the United States got involved with World War II. A little know fact is woman began to routinely shave their legs because of nylon stockings. Starting in 1942, nylon production began to be used for the war effort. Nylon was used for parachutes, tents, shoelaces, rope, paintbrushes, netting, and tires. The nylon stocking production eventually came to a halt except for the military buying them to be used as bribes for information. Women would draw a line up the back of each leg to simulate seamed stockings or they would use liquid makeup on their legs to give the appearance of stockings. Manufacturers returned to making stockings out of cotton or

rayon. But the love for nylon stockings was so great that a stocking black market was born. In 1945, almost immediately after the war, nylon again was used to make stockings. The demand for nylon stockings was so great that fights broke out at stores as women tried to purchase them. These fights become known across the country as Nylon Riots.

After a few years, production of nylon stockings caught up to the demand. Now stocking manufacturers could become creative. The accent seam was created using a different colored thread, often black. The thread was coiled around the seam of the stocking. A contrast seam was made when the seamstress would use a contrasting colored thread to sew the stocking material. RHT (reinforced heel and toe) stockings were made by using a thicker nylon tread in the heel and toe area to help keep holes from forming in these high stress areas. This also allowed for fancy heel designs; block, point, zigzag and fancy foot. Textures and patterns also became popular.

Changing the knitting process of stockings create a different weave. Mesh weaves made stockings last longer and certain mesh weaves were even called Kant Run. This was very important since stockings were required to be worn for business and they were costly to buy. Mesh weave caused a rougher finish to the stocking creating a coarse look. The weave was improved with the Micromesh weave which created a less coarse looking stocking. Finally the Microfilm or pinpoint weave gave the best of both worlds, a somewhat smooth finish while being longer lasting than the flat knit stocking. The mesh weave made a stocking that had a soft feel and a mat finish instead of a silky feel with a shiny finish. It was the same nylon just a different weave that changed the feel and appearance of the stocking.

Manufacturers looked at the top part of a stocking, the area referred to as the Welt that gives a secure place for the clasp. They made welts with different materials, lengths, and widths to improve fit and comfort. Imprints became popular. Companies began printing on the welt with information ranging from just size to fancy graphics for trademarks. Some manufactures took the weave knit and added it in the welt and toe areas on a flat knit stocking to add durability. Lanolizing was a process that added lanoline to the stocking to create a very smooth feel and give it a high sheen. Different manufacturers used varying amounts of lanoline and some stockings were known for their high lanoline content. Silicone is used for hosiery today instead of lanoline. Proportional shaping was done to accommodate different leg shapes. Since nylon starts out white, dyeing it was easy and allowed for a wide range of colors.

Manufacturing of stockings on the original knitting machine was a very wasteful, time consuming, hot, and labor intensive process. A new type of knitting machine was invented that used a circular design instead of a long flat layout. Circular knitting machines quickly replaced the flat knitting machines for several reasons. The circular knitting machines were easier to run, needing less personnel to operate, requiring less maintenance, took up less room, made more first quality stockings per hour, and no seamstress was needed. Stockings became cheaper to produce. Stockings made on a

circular knitting machine can still have a seam but it is just for looks, not to hold the material together.

The public liked the option of having a stocking without seams. The seamless stocking became very popular. Before the seamless stocking, the obsession of keeping the seams straight was a standard practice. The act of a woman stopping and adjusting her stocking seam was a common event and can still be seen in old movies and photos. With the popularity of seamless stockings, the seamed stocking took on a different role. Just like today, seams had a sex appeal to them. The movies would often have a woman wear seamed stockings to help develop her character. When a woman was wearing seamed stockings she probably was a villain, tempest, or wanting to be sexy.

Original nylon fiber does not stretch. So nylon stockings had to have many sizes to fit all the different legs. Stockings were made in half sizes to match a foot size although the numbers didn't match your shoe size. They ran 8.5, 9, 9.5...12 with each size having three lengths; short, medium, and long. Then to help with different fullness of women's legs, proportional cuts were added by some manufacturers to allow for the perfect fit (opera, petite and outsized). Of course you would have different colors in all the sizes along with the different weaves and sheerness. Then add different manufacturers and this gave the public a huge selection of stockings to choose from. But this created a real problem for retailers trying to display and stock all the different stockings.

The stretching or give when wearing true nylons is through the garter belt straps, called suspenders in Europe. True stockings look like your leg, not a ball of material and they appear very long out of the package compared to stretch stockings. They don't compress your leg and there is no wrapped feeling. The glossy finish of a flat knit weave emphasizes the shape of legs and gives legs a very classy, elegant look. They feel wonderful on your skin. But finding the perfect fit for your leg took a lot of experimenting with different manufacturers. Since you have no stretch of material, shoe size, leg fullness, and length of leg, all needed to be considered when buying stockings. Each manufacturer had their own way of deciding how to "size" the stocking. This created much confusion but also made for strong brand loyalty after you found the perfect fit. It was then discovered that the nylon fiber could be crimped and twisted under heat and thus given a stretch to the stocking. Using this crimped nylon, it allowed for better fit and less sizes to be produced.

Although nylon stockings were available in many colors, styles, and textures, the shorter skirt fashion arrived in the 60s and changed stocking history. Stockings were shorter in length than what we see today which wasn't a problem until the hemline got shorter (keep this in mind when buying vintage stockings). Since the tops of the stockings (welt) would show with the shorter hemlines, the pantyhose was the perfect solution. The pantyhose was originally developed in the late 50s but not practically manufactured until a few years later. Stocking manufacturers that didn't switch over to pantyhose manufacturing increased the length of their stockings so the tops wouldn't be seen under a shorter skirt. Some manufacturers created options for stockings so they could be worn

with just a girdle or special panties. Stockings were also made without the welt and were marketed for the “long leg look.

Then in 1964, Dupont introduced a reprocessed nylon fiber called Cantreze, which was a true stretch nylon. This was the first reprocessing of the original nylon specifically for the hosiery market. Even though this fiber was great for the stocking market, it was even better for the pantyhose market. Nylon has been reprocessed several times since then to have even more stretch capabilities. The problem is the word nylon is used for many types of the nylon fiber but the original nylon does not stretch. Another fiber called Lycra was invented and blended with nylon to add durability. But the craze and “convenience” of pantyhose, no garter belt needed, crushed the stocking manufacturers. **This is not to say that nothing was compromised in the process.** The original nylon stocking has been imitated for many years but never matched.

Today, many stockings are made on the same production line as pantyhose so they stretch. There are still a few non-stretch stocking manufacturers in the world and wearing stockings is more popular in Europe than in the United States. England was in a stocking craze for a while when Princess Diana started wearing black seamed stockings. Flight attendants for British Airways and other airlines have been seen wearing stockings. Some flight attendants feel that stockings are more comfortable to wear on long flights. Also swing dance became popular again a few years ago and many woman dancers dressed in swing era styles that include stockings. Since stocking popularity has picked up again, idle knitting machines and mills are being started again.

DuPont continues to spend many dollars to help make pantyhose better because their research shows most women say pantyhose are ill fitting and uncomfortable. Thigh highs are becoming popular since woman are finding them more comfortable than pantyhose but you have the pull of the silicone bands on your skin, the tightness of the band on your leg, and worse of all, they can slide down. Stretch stockings are considered by some to be better than thigh highs but they are not real nylons. Some manufacturers are making a hybrid type of stocking by adding just a touch of Lycra to original nylon, giving a better fit because of the slight stretch.

Just like riding in an old car, wearing stockings is part of the nostalgia trend. Besides the nostalgia, some people feel that the advantages that pantyhose brought caused the beauty and comfort of the non-stretch stocking to be lost. Women are returning to wearing true stockings because of the comfort they offer and the look they create. Most first time flat knit stocking wears can't believe how wonderful these stockings feel on their legs.

Two common terms used when talking about stockings are Denier and Gauge. Denier is a measurement of the thickness or diameter of the nylon thread. Nylon thread became thinner and thinner, thus creating options for very sheer stockings. The lower the denier number, the sheerer the stocking. Sheerness and denier are similar terms but denier is an exact measurement where sheerness is a general concept. Sheerness can be judged by how see through the stocking is. Some common deniers were 70, 30, and 15. Service weight, usually 70 denier, was worn for rough work (maid) and wasn't sheer but lasted

longer and was warmer than a sheerer stocking. 30 denier was considered daily or business ware was called walking or business sheer. Evening sheer, 15 denier, was usually saved for going out at night. Ultra sheer is 12 denier or less and is very fragile. But you could still easily find other deniers to get the exact sheerness you wanted.

Gauge is measured by counting the number of knits or loops per 1.5 square inches. A simple way to gauge a stocking is to see how close each thread is to each other. The higher the gauge, the tighter the weave and the smoother the look and feel will be. Stocking gauges would range from 40 to 75. When a stocking is over 60 gauge, it has a very smooth feel and dense look to it. Sometimes the number of knitting needles used is listed instead of the gauge count. The higher the number of needles used, the closer the knit (400 needles equals 45 gauge). But the more needles used to produce a stocking, the higher the manufacturing cost.

The “negative” concerning wearing stockings is the need for a garter belt. Often people see the tiny lacey garter belts at the store and may have even tried them but these are just not practical for comfortable wear. Good garter belts are comfortable and don't cost much more than the little lacey ones. Garter belts can be made from different material and the heaviness of the material will also vary. Worn on top of the hip, garter belts are usually 4 to 6 inches in length, measured from top to bottom – this measurement does not include the straps. The 8-inch garter belt has recently become popular. Wider garter belts, called full or girdlette (10 to 12 inches), can offer support for the waistline. Girdles, Corsets and Waist cinchers are other articles of lingerie that can have straps for stockings. So you can easily incorporate stockings with different lingerie.

The straps from the garter belt attach to the stocking by clasps. The more straps, the better. When more straps are used, the smoother the stocking will look and if on that rare occasion a clasp breaks, there would be no sag in your stocking. Metal clasps are better than plastic ones since plastic can crack. Be sure the straps are adjustable so you can custom fit the amount of tension on a stocking. Don't substitute thigh highs for stockings because the thick rubber can bend the clasps. Generally a six-strap garter belt has one strap in the front, one on the side and one in the back. Stretch stocking wearers can use a four-strap garter belt but non-stretch stockings work better with at least six straps.

A good starting point for a six-strap garter belt is to adjust the back straps 2 inches longer than the front straps and the side straps 1 inch longer than the front straps. Some garter belts are cut / shaped longer in the back than in the front to help in this area because when you sit down there is a farther distance to go on your back side to reach the stocking. When standing, there should be slight pull on the stockings but the word here is slight – over pull will either damage the stocking or cause the garter belt to slide down. If you are wearing stretch stockings, you can keep the straps tighter, letting the stocking do some of the give.

Rules for putting on stockings are the same as pantyhose: no jagged finger nails and toe nails; remove rings if they are not smooth; hands should be smooth or wear hosiery

gloves; roll the stocking down into an O-shape, place thumbs inside then start unrolling over the foot and up the leg (pointing toes, foot forward helps).

Attach the stocking to the back straps first. This helps to keep the stocking straight (even ones without a seam). If you are wearing seamed stockings, place the back strap in line with the seam if possible (seamed stockings are best worn with 6 or more straps which will keep the seam straight). Try sitting down which makes it easier to attach the back straps. Another trick is not to pull the garter belt all the way up until you have attached the straps to the stockings. To keep your stockings from twisting, attach the straps straight down from the garter belt. If you are wearing Full Fashion stockings, do not put the clasp in the finishing hole – this is a weak area of the stocking.

The first few times you wear stockings, wear them around the house for a while before you leave to be sure everything is adjusted properly. If you are wearing a short skirt, be sure to sit down and see if the stockings are long enough. Most catalogs have the garter belt shown being worn incorrectly. If you wear panties put them on LAST over your garter belt. Think about going to the bathroom – if you have your stockings and garter belt over your panties then you have to remove all of that to go to the bathroom. This isn't a problem if you are use to wearing stockings but at first you probably are better off to put your panties on last.

When stockings need to be washed, follow these steps: Hand wash by gently swishing and squeezing the stockings (don't rub or twist) in lukewarm water using a product like Woolite (another great product is Hosiery Mate and you don't need to rinse) – rinse in clean water, gently squeezing and then lay out flat on a towel to dry (room temperature, away from direct heat). You can also use a drying tree but place a towel on the floor since the water will drip off the stockings.

Keep in mind that two pairs of stockings will last three pairs of pantyhose since you toss out pantyhose when you get a runner in one leg but with stockings, you just toss out the one with the runner and still use the other.

You can create different looks with stockings because they can be purchased with or without a seam. There are French heel (the design goes to a point), Cuban heel, Blocked heel, Contrasting seam (the seam is a different color than the stocking itself), Reinforced Heel and Toe (RHT), Accent seam, Textured, Patterns, Fishnet, along with many colors.

Most internet sites and catalogs give good information about their stockings and sizing but you may have to try different brands / styles to get the perfect fit - so don't buy six pairs because you get a price break until you know they fit properly. Also the same retail place can sell stockings by different manufacturers but they are not always listed as being different. Buy in bulk to save money when you find the ones that fit well. Get friends together to share shipping costs. See what the return policy is and don't be afraid to ask questions – sellers want your repeat business so they are not going to steer you wrong.