



Tech Support

To wearable or not to wearable? As Vanessa Lawrence discovers, that is the question.

On an unseasonably chilly spring morning, I am standing on a subway platform shivering and cursing the gossamer-thin layers beneath my black and white checked Courrèges coat. Instead of suffering, I simply tap the button on my upper left shoulder, activating an internal-insulation mechanism that sends warmth radiating across my shoulders and back. I spend the rest of my commute in a state of toasty nirvana.

Welcome to the new age of wearable tech. What began with bracelet activity trackers, like the Nike + FuelBand, and culminated with the Hermès Apple Watch, has grown to encompass temperature-regulating clothing, cocktail rings that send alerts when we receive calls and tweets, and mood-altering headgear. And unlike, say, the remote-controlled dress from Hussein Chalayan's spring 2000 collection or the glow-in-the-dark Zac Posen gown Claire Danes donned for this year's tech-themed Met Gala, these wearables are more about function than fabulosity. Our clothes, it would seem, are smarter than we are.

Not long after Courrèges sent its heat-packed toppers down the runway this past spring, Nike introduced its self-tightening HyperAdapt 1.0 sneakers, which will be available to fulfill your *Back to the Future* dreams for the holidays. Michael Kors is partnering with Google on a wearables line, starting with something called the Access Smartwatch; and Caeden has released a bracelet that monitors your pulse—and your stress—and provides options for a meditation break. Microsoft, meanwhile, has a patent for a shirt that uses body sensors to gauge your mood—and alter it accordingly. And Levi's has teamed up with Google on Project Jacquard to develop jeans that will send a message to your smartphone when they sense you've put on some extra pounds.

My jeans already tell me when I've gained weight, by refusing to zip. Nevertheless, I was intrigued, and took a few of these gadgets on a test run. "I'm designing for an attention economy," says Christina Mercado d'Avignon, the creator of Ringly, a jewelry start-up whose offerings include a cocktail ring that syncs with social media apps, e-mail accounts, and phone and text contacts, alerting you to notifications with colored

flashing lights and vibration patterns. (The latest version also incorporates a fitness tracker; and d'Avignon is partnering with MasterCard so wearers can use the ring to, say, buy jewelry.) Ringly acts like a private bouncer, letting through only the information you deem as priority. "I really value the time when I can focus," d'Avignon says. "I only want to know when something is important."

I decide everything is important, so I gleefully sync all possible options in the Ringly apps menu, and then watch as my emerald knocker shimmers and shakes while I type away at my desk at work. My Misfit Ray pendant (fitness-and-sleep tracker, alarm, and call/text notifier) is also vibrating along, reminding me, every 40 minutes, to stand up and walk around. I feel so popular and in control. No glancing at my phone every few minutes to see if I have gotten any messages. No fears that my job is going to turn me into a sloth. The only downside is that the high demand on my Bluetooth is draining the battery on my phone. So I whip off my Rebecca Minkoff bracelet (it doubles as a charge cord) and plug it into my juiced-up Ralph Lauren Ricky bag (interior LED light panel; phone charger). Removing my coat and attendant accessories at the end of every day—save for the Misfit Ray, which I need in order to track my sleep—feels like taking out my SIM card.

The next morning I am awakened by an unfamiliar buzzing on my chest. Ah, my Ray alarm. A glance at the app confirms that I achieved six hours and 51 minutes of "restful" sleep, but without a snooze button, the only way to get it to stop is to, well, get up. As I am about to leave for the gym, I realize I neglected to charge my Ricky bag, my Ringly, and the attachment for my fitness-tracking PoloTech workout shirt. I dump all the cords into the bottom of my bag and run out the door. My one-hour boxing session at S10 with my trainer, Stephen Cheuk, doesn't even register on my Ray (probably because I had it tucked into my sports bra to avoid being pelted in the face), and, according to the PoloTech app, I had burned only 120 calories (I blame that low score on the shirt, which is designed for men, and did not fit snugly enough). Determined to make up the points for my Misfit Ray goal, I walk to work. By late afternoon, I am exhausted and listless. But I have a party to attend and need to rally.

Thankfully, there is a wearable for that too! The Thync, a triangular white pod that affixes to your right temple via an adhesive strip, sends FDA-approved pulsed currents to your nerve endings, delivering, or so it claims, the effect of either a glass of wine or a cup of coffee, depending on the setting. And while it is true that the "energy" Vibe provides a pleasant, buzzing feeling in my head and an overall sensation of warmth, the gizmo also prompted some interesting comments from my colleagues. "You look like a cyborg," one tells me.

I am starting to feel like one. What's more, I am jumpy from all the vibrating, and I can no longer keep track of the flashing colors on my Ringly. Even the "calm" Vibe on my Thync doesn't seem to help. According to Ali Mattu, a clinical psychologist and behaviorist who is a faculty member of Columbia University's Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders, nothing about this is surprising. "Each time you get a notification, you have to make a decision. That drains your brain. And the more you do that, the more mentally exhausted you're going to be," he says. "We were not built to be constantly plugged in."

Ultimately, I ditch everything except for the Courrèges coat, which made no demands on my attention and wanted nothing more than to keep me warm. Sounds downright human, when you think about it. ♦