

# Menstrual Products – a Real Eye Opener

By Wikaniko

“The average woman in Western society will throw away 10,000 to 15,000 disposable pads or tampons in her life, along with the packaging, and plastic applicators etc.”

## A History of Menstrual Products



Women have been particularly creative in the materials they have used to collect menstrual fluids. The list of absorbent materials is really quite endless and includes, animal pelts, mosses, sea sponges and seaweed, along with the usual cotton, wool, rags and vegetable fibres.

Sponges and cotton wadding were used as tampons in Europe in the 17th century. At this time pads were held in place with a belt with tape or string to secure them in place. Pads were made from oil silk (because it could be easily washed), cotton fibres, cotton waste, wood wool, wadding, paper, wood fibres, linen.

Tampons have been used by women for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptian women made tampons from softened papyrus. In other countries early tampons were made of lint wrapped around lightweight wood, wool, vegetable plant fibres and in Equatorial Africa women used rolls of grass.

The earliest commercial tampons were available in the early 1900s. Whereas pads have undergone quite a lot of transformation over time from bulky reusable rags to disposable cotton worn attached to a belt, from bulky rectangular sponge-like things to ultra-thins with wings and adhesive backing, tampons have always been either sponges or wads of cotton or rayon fibres, usually attached to a cord.

Disposable products started to be made in the 1940s, firstly with belted pads and then in the 1960s with adhesive-backed pads. The 1990s saw the use of absorbent gels built into pads.

The menstrual cup has been in use for at least 150 years, being first used from rubber collected in India.



The history of the menstrual cup appears to be relatively recent. There is a record of a patent being granted in 1867 for a cup that was to be worn in the vagina and attached by cord to a metal belt. A later patent for a menstrual cup in the 1930's more closely resembles the cups of today. It was made of vulcanised rubber and didn't gain much popularity because it was hard and heavy.

Modern cups are made from softer rubber, silicone, and medical grade silicone that is latex free. Although menstrual cups have never gained mass support in the past, women are currently turning to cups as an alternative to conventional pads and tampons because of health, ecological, economic and practical reasons.

### Disposable Menstrual Products

Media-created perceptions about menstruation

Historically, and still in many cultures such as certain African and Native American cultures the coming of menstruation is celebrated with feasting, dancing, ceremony and great joy. Ancient traditions on many continents deeply revere menstruating women. Our menstruation is a symbol of our health and fertility.

The media, driven by large companies, has created or perpetuated the image of menstruation as something tinged with shame and embarrassment. We have a range of euphemisms for it e.g. monthly visitor, Auntie Flo, the painters and decorators are in, the curse, that time of the month, riding the horsey.

Advertisements for disposable menstrual products perpetuate the social taboo surrounding menstruation with emphasis of such features as 'discreet' wrapping and 'odour controlling layers'. This keeps the billion-dollar market silent, unempowered and unquestioning. The marketers of disposable menstrual products have convinced millions of women that chemical ridden, synthetic disposable pads and tampons are the only options – along with a range of 'smell nice' toxic sprays and powders to boot.



There is no denying the 'convenience' of these disposable products. This is one of the things that make the change to products that are natural and good for your health and the health of the planet difficult to accomplish. But when we understand the situation – the overwhelming evidence of their negative effects for ourselves, our families and the whole ecosystem - we cannot not make the decision to change to reusable, natural, organic products.

### Risks Associated with Conventional Menstrual Products

It is surprising that the majority of women continue to suffer the consequences of using conventional tampons and pads without questioning what is happening and why.

### Toxic Shock Syndrome

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) is a rare but potentially fatal disease caused by a bacterial toxin. It has been associated with tampon use. TSS continues to cause serious illness, sometimes fatal, with symptoms including high fever, sunburn-like rash, nausea, diarrhoea, headache, sore throat, and achy muscles. Studies have shown that almost 99 percent of all

TSS cases are found in women wearing rayon-blend tampons. The exact connection between the bacteria, TSS, and synthetic tampons remains unclear. There are a number of factors involved, including hygiene practices and the length of time a tampon is left in place. Another factor is greater absorbency, as there are more cases reported among women who use high absorbency tampons.

Tampons do not cause TSS, and the disease is not limited to menstruating women. Men, children and non-menstruating women can also get TSS. Younger women are at greater risk because they haven't developed the antibodies to the bacteria or toxin that causes TSS.

Commercial tampons are typically manufactured from rayon fibres and viscose. The bacteria, *Staphylococcus aureus* that is responsible for toxic shock syndrome, breeds easily on synthetic fibres such as rayon and viscose. Rayon is a synthetic product made from cellulose, which is derived from wood pulp.

The use of 100 percent cotton tampons may reduce the risk of TSS compared with tampons that contain rayon. Studies have shown that all-cotton tampons as opposed to cotton blend tampons do not produce the dangerous TSS toxins from the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*.

### Toxins in conventional pads and tampons

Women's genital tissue is highly sensitive, and chemicals are easily absorbed into their bodies, causing irritation, discomfort, and serious health problems. We already live in a toxic, polluted environment. Wherever we can we need to reduce our exposure to toxins. It is very easy to reduce our exposure to the toxins in menstrual products.

### Dioxins and Furans

Dioxins and furans is the abbreviated or short name for a family of toxic substances that all share a similar chemical structure. Most dioxins and furans are not produced intentionally, but are created when other chemicals or products are made.

Dioxins are toxic by-products of the chlorine bleaching process. Non-organic fibre production such as cotton, is sprayed with pesticides that release toxins, including dioxin, into the environment, leaving chemical residue in the fibre e.g. cotton.

Dioxins have been found in tampons and pads. Once it is in the environment it cannot be removed. It accumulates in the fatty tissue of humans and animals. We are all susceptible to dioxin contamination through our diet and the environment, but there is no logical reason why women should be subject to the additional exposure from their menstrual products.

**The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies dioxins as a 'known human carcinogen'. Furans are also considered as possibly carcinogenic.**

Action by the Women's Environmental Network has led to most major manufacturers using alternative bleaching processes to chlorine bleaches. Despite this there is evidence to suggest that these alternative processes merely reduce possible dioxin contamination – they do not eliminate it.

Low levels of dioxins are linked to cancer, endometriosis, low sperm counts in men, immune system suppression, pelvic inflammatory disease, reduced fertility, and changes in hormone levels.

## Natural Menstrual Products

There are alternatives. Washable menstrual products are making a comeback in the form of cloth pads, reusable menstrual cups, and sea sponges. This is another example of the cycles of tradition that exist – all these products were around 100 years ago. We have ended our madness and fascination with disposable, convenient, and fast, and are moving towards reconnection with our bodies, our lives, our communities

### Pads

Pads, variously known as napkins, surfboards, rags, towels, and cloths.

It is not just the chemicals from bleaching or from attempts to increase the absorbency of the material, that are toxic to our bodies and the environment, pads usually contain a plastic layer, and adhesive as well.



Washable pads offer women a positive, healthier, and ecologically sound alternative to traditional disposable menstrual pads. They are soft, absorbent and comfortable to wear. Since one of the reasons to use non-disposable as opposed to disposable is to avoid exposure to toxic chemicals, it is important to choose washable pads made from organic fabric if you can. Different manufacturers use different organic fabrics, with the most popular being chambray cotton, hemp, linen, jersey, wool and bamboo.

### Tampons

In one form or another, tampons have been around for thousands of years. The traditional tampon works by expanding inside the vagina to absorb blood flow and prevent leaks. Tampons are typically made of cotton or rayon/cotton blend. Most come with an applicator made of plastic or cardboard.

**Tampons of any kind remove up to 35 percent of healthy vaginal secretions.**

The use of conventional tampons has some personal and health effects. Most current tampons are rayon and rayon/cotton blends, which have been chlorine bleached and contain dioxins and furans. Rayon tampons also carry with them a greater risk of toxic shock syndrome. Tampon use is also associated with an increased risk of vaginal dryness and vaginal ulcers, especially with the more absorbent tampons.



Most tampons come with plastic or cardboard applicator. Despite all the entreaties of manufacturers and building managers, these applicators continue to be flushed down toilets in alarming numbers. Not only are these a problem for sewage treatment plants they also end up in the

ocean and washed up on the beach.

Environmentally friendly and health friendly tampons are made of non-GMO, organic cotton, hemp or other fibre that is grown without the use of herbicides, pesticides, are free of dioxin and furan residues, and are chlorine free.



### Cups

The menstrual cup is a type of cup or barrier worn internally like a tampon but collects menstrual fluid rather than absorbing it. Cups are reusable, and will typically hold 30 ml of fluid, which is roughly one third of the average total produced each menstrual cycle. It is recommended that the cup is emptied every 6-12 hours. The frequency is an individual decision based on the volume of fluid released, and each woman is different. Correctly inserted the cup is comfortable but it may take a little practice to find the angle and position that is right for your body.

There are two main kinds of menstrual cups currently available. The most common kind is the bell-shaped cup made of latex rubber or silicone. These cups tend to last approximately 10 years depending on how they are cleaned and stored. The second kind of menstrual cup is more like a contraceptive diaphragm. This product is designed for single use only.

Originally cups made from rubber were too hard but today rubber cups are soft and have a feel like the baby bottle teats that are made from rubber.

The cup forms a light seal with the vaginal walls allowing the menstrual fluid to pass into the cup without leakage or odour. Its use does not interfere with the healthy vaginal environment, and its use has not been associated with toxic shock syndrome. Some women find, due to anatomical differences caused from childbirth, that there can be a very slight leakage. If this is the case, women can use a light cotton pad on their heaviest days.

Menstrual cups can be emptied, rinsed or wiped and then reinserted. They can be cleaned by washing with soap and water and by boiling in water for 20 minutes after each cycle.

### Sponges

There are more than 4500 varieties of sea sponges. They are plant-like animals growing in colonies on the ocean floor. The softest ones are the Atlantic and Mediterranean Silks. Harvesting sea sponges can have a disastrous ecological impact. For these reasons the use of sea sponges as menstrual products are not endorsed by Wikaniko.

### Other Feminine Products

Douches and feminine sprays, powders etc. supposedly keep a woman's vaginal area smelling fresh and clean. Douching refers to washing the vagina usually with a premix of chemicals. Feminine sprays and douches are often heavily perfumed and can lead to allergic reactions or even infections in the vagina. The vagina has its own natural cleaning system that flushes out bacteria, so it doesn't need chemicals to do the job.

## Douche

US statistics show that 37% of US women of reproductive age (15-44 years) douche regularly, about half at least once a week. Although these are statistics from the US, they give us some indication of the situation for women globally. This study also found that one third of white women douche whereas two thirds of black women do so. Researchers also found an association between more frequent douching and lower socio-economic status especially for white women. Douching often is a cultural hygiene practice passed from mother to daughter without understanding as to why the practice is beneficial or not. It is a cultural practice that is reinforced by the media-created perception of women's genital area and menstruation.

Most women who douche use a commercial preparation. Home-made preparations are mostly vinegar and water, water alone or some other preparation.

Douching carries some health risks. Pelvic inflammatory disease is 73% more common in women who douche. Similarly women who douche have a 76 % increased risk of ectopic pregnancy, and an increased risk of cervical cancer.

Women who douche at least once a month are at greater risk of Bacterial vaginosis (BV) than women who don't douche. This may be a result of disruption of normal vaginal microbiology that leads to vulnerability to BV.

Bacterial vaginosis is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age, and half of women who are infected don't have any symptoms. What is of real concern is that Bacterial vaginosis has been linked to acquisition of HIV, pre-term birth, and pelvic inflammatory disease.

## Powder

Apart from specific feminine hygiene powders many women use body talc to 'freshen' their genital area. All these powders contain talc and are dangerous to our health. When applied to the genital area or even nearby regions of the body, talc can enter the female reproductive tract and collect in ovaries where it markedly increases the risk of ovarian cancer and infertility. Feminine hygiene sprays and sanitary napkins (particularly scented or deodorant type) are dangerous for this reason.

Talc is a naturally occurring mineral that is crushed into powder form for use in body talc and feminine hygiene products. Talc often occurs naturally in conjunction with asbestos fibres, a known human carcinogen. There is no guarantee that talc used in these products is asbestos free.

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