



Women's  
Environmental  
Network

briefing

*"Empowering women to change the environment for the better"*

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# Seeing Red

## Sanitary Protection & The Environment

Menstruation is a natural and healthy part of life, and a number of cultures choose to celebrate the moment when a girl experiences her first period. In these cultures, the monthly cycle is honoured as a time of reflection and a source of women's strength.

Despite a growing awareness of this in the developed world, monthly periods still tend to be a taboo subject, traditionally shrouded in secrecy and awkwardness.

There is also the question of the products we use - or, rather, are sold - which have a massive impact on the environment, and can affect our health.

For more than 20 years, WEN has campaigned for greater awareness of the health and environmental issues around sanitary protection, or what WEN prefers to call 'menstrual lingerie' - the waste it generates; what those products contain; and the options available.

If we were to change certain social attitudes towards periods, we might positively affect the way we experience them, and make different choices about the menstrual lingerie we use, which in turn could have a major impact on our health and environment.



Seeing Red: unmasking the environmental and health impacts of disposable sanitary products.

**An average woman throws away an astonishing 125 to 150kg of tampons, pads and applicators in her lifetime.<sup>1</sup>**

### Natural process; unnatural waste...

In the UK, the use of tampons, pads and applicators generates more than 200,000 tonnes of waste per year.<sup>2</sup> The great majority of these products end up incinerated, in landfill, or reappearing in our seas and rivers. The manufacture, use and disposal of these products also releases pollutants into our environment.

### Flushed but not forgotten

Disposal of menstrual products is a major problem. Along with cotton buds, tampons, applicators and panty liners make up 7.3 % of items flushed down the toilet in the UK.<sup>3</sup> For every kilometre of beach included in the Beachwatch survey weekend in 2010, 22.5 towels/panty liners/backing strips, and 8.9 tampon applicators, were found.

According to the Sewer Network Action Programme, even products that are described as flushable or biodegradable can contribute to more than half (55%) of sewer flooding due to blockages in sewers. Therefore, no matter what it says on the packaging, most personal healthcare and beauty products should never be disposed of down the toilet.<sup>4</sup>

**It's best to bag and bin sanitary waste.**



## It's not blue... period

We are conditioned to believe that menstruation is something to be kept secret, to be ashamed of and to hide; even that menstrual blood is 'dirty'. But why, when periods are the stuff of life? After all, menstrual blood is what nurtures and protects a developing foetus in the womb. Furthermore, who is responsible for keeping this thinking alive?

### Sanitising the truth: the impact of advertising

Language used around menstruation is important: the very existence of products labelled 'feminine hygiene' perpetuates a myth that women are somehow dirty and in need of special cleansing products.

Disposable menstrual lingerie is widely seen as a significant factor in women's liberation, yet the language and imagery often used in media and adverts to express that liberation serves to reinforce the culture of silence. The disposables industry reinforces notions that discretion and 'freshness' are key, and that odour is a problem, through the products they develop and the way they advertise them.

Blue liquid is used to demonstrate absorption; adverts suggest tampons are packaged so discreetly they can be mistaken for sweets; 'blood' and 'menstruation' are rarely mentioned; new products, such as fragranced pads, are developed for problems we didn't even know we had.

Manufacturers and advertisers will no doubt say they are responding to public attitudes, but how much are our attitudes shaped by their messages? The money spent on selling these products to us is significant: the disposables industry dedicated more than £14 million to advertising its products in the UK in 2009, while their messages had a core target audience totalling 18.6 million women in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, we are regularly bombarded with imagery and language that reflect - and therefore perpetuate and perhaps determine - negative societal and cultural perceptions of menstruation.<sup>6</sup>

### Manipulating menstruation

Negativity surrounding periods has been capitalised upon to such an extent that suppressing menstruation is being marketed as if the normal menstrual cycle itself were the problem. By way of hormonal contraceptive medication, it is possible to reduce the number of periods to just four a year.

Little, if anything, is known about the effects of this manipulation on women's bodies. The pills have been targeted at younger women, focusing on the negative aspects of menstruation and highlighting none of the positive.<sup>10</sup>

Historic experience of manipulation of women's menstrual cycles and hormones resulting in adverse health effects should stand as a warning.<sup>11</sup> Menstruation affects the entire endocrine system, as well as cardiovascular health and bone strength. The long-term health implications of manipulating natural hormone levels in this way remain to be seen.



It's not vulgar, it's vulva! Created by British artist Jamie McCartney, 'The Great Wall of Vagina', consists of 400 plaster casts of vulvas, each one unique. The work aims to combat the anxiety felt by women about their genital appearance and the desire for a 'perfect' vagina.

**A massive market:**  
In the UK alone, we buy more than 3 billion items of menstrual lingerie every year, spending £349 million in 2010 on sanitary and 'feminine hygiene' products.<sup>7</sup> What's more, disposable panty liners used between periods are increasing the size of the market, with sales of £56 million in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, feminine hygiene wipes have seen the biggest growth, with sales of £4.8m in 2010.<sup>9</sup>

Views of menstruation vary throughout history and across cultures, from the very positive and empowering to the utterly negative and shameful.

Only comparatively recently did disposable sanitary towels come into being. First produced in 1896, they didn't become popular until the late 1920s, when the first commercially available tampon appeared on the US market. Before this, women used cloth or toweling rags, which were washed and reused.<sup>12</sup>

Nowadays, no longer classed as a 'luxury' item, sanitary wear is still, however, subject to 5% VAT.

Many women have reported adverse allergic reactions to the synthetic ingredients, fragrances and plastics in disposable sanitary products, and to new cover sheets used in sanitary towels. According to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, two of the most common contact allergens are preservatives and fragrance.<sup>13</sup>

Just as in cosmetics, fragrances can be comprised of allergens, sensitisers and phthalates (a class of chemicals that has been linked to hormone disruption), which can affect development and fertility.<sup>14</sup>

So-called 'intimate hygiene' wipes and vaginal washes contain chemicals, such as parabens, which can penetrate human skin, mimic the female hormone oestrogen, and are linked to breast cancer.<sup>15</sup>

### Just a wad of cotton?

Despite being whiter-than-white, disposable menstrual products are NOT sterile. They do not have to be, as they are not classified as medical devices in Europe. Sanitary towels and tampons come under the EU directive on general product safety although it does not specifically mention them.<sup>16</sup> In the UK, an industry-led initiative called the Code of Practice for Tampons means that the sanitary protection industry polices itself.<sup>17</sup>

The new EU chemicals legislation which entered into force in June 2007 will impact on the chemicals used in the manufacture of sanitary products. Certain chemicals will be more stringently regulated or banned for use in certain consumer products.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, manufacturers are not required to list all the ingredients and materials used in sanitary towels and tampons on the side of packs to enable women as consumers to make an informed choice about their menstrual wear.

Disposable sanitary towels and panty liners are also made mostly from wood pulp, bleached from its natural brown colour. Tampons are made from either cotton, or a mixture of cotton and rayon. Use of cotton raises issues of land and water usage, fair trade, pesticide use, and genetic modification (see 'The alternatives' below).

### The real dirt

The chlorine bleaching of pulp produces dioxins, a known human carcinogen, and highly toxic environmental pollutants with serious health implications. WEN's first campaign persuaded manufacturers to change the bleaching method; they now use either chlorine dioxide or hydrogen peroxide, which produces less dioxin.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are currently no controls or testing on the levels of dioxins in tampons and sanitary towels.<sup>20</sup> While chlorine-free bleaching processes are available, most wood-pulp manufacturers only use elemental-chlorine-free bleaching processes, which still use chlorine dioxide as a bleaching agent, and therefore still produce dioxin.



100g of sanitary products. Multiply this by 1,500 to reach the approximate amount an average woman will throw away over her lifetime (125kg-150kg)

### Toxic Shock Syndrome

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a rare but sometimes fatal disease. Tampon-related TSS was identified in 1980, when a number of deaths were directly linked to a specific brand of super-absorbent tampon, subsequently withdrawn from sale.<sup>21</sup>

The symptoms of TSS appear quickly and are often severe. In 2001, a 13-year-old British girl died of tampon-related TSS after using tampons for the very first time throughout her period.<sup>22</sup>

TSS has been linked to the use of super-absorbent and newer, less absorbent tampons made of viscose rayon, both with and without cotton. A study of 20 tampon varieties concluded that 100% cotton tampons did not produce the dangerous TSS toxin from the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*, while tampons with rayon did.<sup>23</sup>

TSS remains a concern in connection with tampon usage.<sup>24</sup>

## The alternatives

### Organic cotton

It's not just a fashion trend. Conventional cotton production accounts for 16% of insecticide release into the environment worldwide,<sup>25</sup> and exposes growers and pickers - many of them children - wildlife and the environment to poisoning.

Buying 100% organic cotton tampons reduces pesticide use, and avoids inadvertently using products containing genetically modified (GM) cotton or that has involved child labour. The purchase of organic cotton products also supports the development of organic cotton production, where cotton farmers - the majority of whom are women in developing countries - can safely grow food crops between the cotton and reduce their families' exposure to pesticides.

One to three per cent of agricultural workers worldwide suffer from acute pesticide poisoning, with at least 1 million requiring hospitalisation each year. These figures equate to between 25 million and 77 million agricultural workers worldwide. Pesticide residues may be found in non-organic cotton.<sup>26</sup>



**Mooncup - a menstrual cup made from silicone.**



**Washable pads**

In addition, non-organic tampons may contain GM cotton. WEN questions whether non GM and GM cotton can be separated in the supply chain, and current labelling laws mean that manufacturers don't have to state whether their products contain GM material.

## Reusable menstrual lingerie

Various reusable options are available that provide a more ecological alternative to the industry standard.

For internal use, *menstrual cups* are a well-established alternative to tampons, and have been used for decades. Many types are on the market, two of the most popular being Mooncup© and DivaCup.

As women spend, on average, about £90/year on disposable sanitary products, the use of menstrual cups equates to a loss of one percentage point of the market, meaning a potential loss to the sanitary protection industry of £2.4 m each year.<sup>27</sup>

Menstrual sponges are another internal option. WEN does not recommend them, however, because of outstanding concerns about their potential environmental and health impacts, including

a link with TSS. Several samples were found to contain sand, grit and bacteria.<sup>28</sup>

A second option - *washable towels* - are available in different shapes, sizes, materials, absorbencies - and colours! They can simply be soaked after use and washed with the rest of your laundry. Washable panty liners are also now available.

Finally, why not get creative and make your own? WEN has a pattern available, or simply use a style you like as a template and then create your own in colours and materials of your choice (see separate factsheet).

It's important to note that when ordering or making washable towels, synthetic fabrics and dyes may trigger a sensitive reaction.

## What you can do

- Don't flush your disposable menstrual lingerie down the toilet; instead bag it and bin it.
- Consider using washable cotton pads or a menstrual cup instead of disposables - you can prevent a lot of waste, and save a lot of money, even if you only use them at night or at home.
- Demand the best and safest products for yourself and the environment by asking for a full list on menstrual lingerie packs of the ingredients and materials used.
- Choose tampons and sanitary towels made from organic cotton.
- Avoid lubrication and/or fragranced products - they are completely superfluous, polluting, and generate unnecessary additional exposure to potentially harmful synthetic chemicals.
- Record your rhythm - developing familiarity with your cycle provides a useful indicator of your health and wellbeing, and a greater awareness of your body.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that a positive attitude, embracing the different stages of your cycle, can alleviate symptoms of PMS and menstrual pain.<sup>29</sup>

**For a list of resources and further reading, visit [www.wen.org.uk](http://www.wen.org.uk).**

### About WEN

Women's Environmental Network is a registered charity educating, informing and empowering women and men who care about the environment. It researches and campaigns on environmental and health issues from a female perspective.

Join WEN today if you support our work for a fairer and more sustainable world.

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