



Women's
Environmental
Network

briefings

WEN
PO Box 30626
London
E1 1TZ

T 020 7481 9004
F 020 7481 9144
sanpro@wen.org.uk
www.wen.org.uk

Seeing Red

Sanitary protection and the environment

Half the population of the planet has periods. Menstruation is a natural and healthy process. Menstrual blood is the stuff of life itself, nourishing the growing foetus in the womb. In many cultures starting your period (menarche) is a time for celebration, and the monthly lunar cycles are respected, honoured and embraced as a time of reflection, renewal and women's power.

So why are we so hung up on the issue? Why, for so many, is it so associated with pain and negativity, surrounded by silence and secrecy? And what effect does this culture of silence have in terms of our choice of sanitary protection (sanpro) and its implications for health and the environment?

Since 1989 WEN has campaigned for greater awareness of the environmental and health issues around sanitary protection (sanpro) and the options available. This briefing looks at the issue and outlines health concerns such as toxic shock syndrome, and pollution from cotton growing, paper bleaching and sanpro disposal.

In the UK we buy more than three billion disposable sanpro items every year; in 2001 we spent £370 million on them.³ Disposable



JANIE AIREY/WEN

Flush and forget? More than four million tampons and pads are flushed away every day in the UK, adding to marine pollution. You can help stop them coming back to haunt us.

panty liners used between periods are increasing the size of the market. It all adds up to a massive number of items every year, which end up incinerated or in landfill, or reappearing in our seas and rivers.

Is the perceived convenience and liberation offered by tampons and disposable pads all it seems? Can we really 'flush and forget'? How can we combine convenience and sustainability, without compromising our health or that of the environment?

What you can do

- Don't flush your disposable sanitary protection down the toilet but 'Bag It and Bin It' and think before you flush.
- Demand the best products for yourself and the environment.
- Choose tampons made of organic cotton.⁵
- Consider using washable cotton pads or menstrual cups instead of disposables - you can prevent a lot of waste even if you only use them at night or at home - see the enclosed stocklist.
- Avoid lubricated and/or fragranced products - these are completely superfluous and generate unnecessary additional exposure to synthetic chemicals.
- Record your rhythm, perhaps using a lunar calendar - developing familiarity with your cycle provides a useful indicator of your health and well-being, and a greater awareness of your body.
- There is anecdotal evidence that a positive attitude, embracing the different stages of your cycle, can alleviate symptoms of PMS and menstrual pain.²⁸

Menstrual taboos - 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 itself is somehow 'dirty'. But why, when menstrual blood is what nurtures and protects a developing foetus in the womb? And who is responsible for keeping these taboos alive?

Attitudes vary between cultures, but generally discussing menstruation in public – or even in private - is still hugely controversial.²³ The disposables industry reinforces notions that discretion and freshness are key and 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.

Disposable sanitary protection 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 taboos. Manufacturers and advertisers will no doubt say they are responding to public attitudes but how much are our attitudes shaped by their messages?

This is a massive market: the industry spent over £24 million advertising disposable products in 2001.³ Consequently we are regularly bombarded with imagery and language that

reflect – and therefore perpetuate – negative societal and cultural perceptions of menstruation.²⁴

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 towelling rags, which were washed and reused.⁶

A 1983 World Health Organisation

survey of women in 10 countries found more than 45% used home-made pads.²⁰

In 2003 a new birth-control pill, Seasonale, was released in the US. Due to be released in the UK some time in 2004, it differs from the conventional pill in that it is specifically designed to reduce the number of periods to just four a year, one every three months.

The long-term health implications of manipulating natural hormone levels in this way remain to be seen.³¹

“Menstruation is nothing new - women have been bleeding regularly since the species began. There are an estimated 15 million menstruating women in the UK²⁹ - on any one day, more than a million women in the UK will be menstruating - more than the populations of Manchester and Liverpool combined”⁷.

LYN HUSO



British artist Lyn Huso used organic disposable pads and tampons in her debut show, 'Right On' in 2003. This work is called 'Black and White Menstruals'.

Sense & sensitivity

Some people suffer from skin allergies and irritations that can cause discomfort in varying degrees. Symptoms such as uncomfortable soreness and/or itching can be heightened during menstruation due to the synthetic ingredients and plastics in disposable sanitary products. A study has identified a number of women who are allergic to the new cover sheets and the materials of a leading brand of disposable sanitary towels.¹⁶ Synthetic fragrances added needlessly to disposable sanitary towels and panty liners can cause allergic reactions and contribute to multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS).¹⁸ More recent developments include tampons with lubricant, containing parabens,³⁵ synthetic chemicals which are suspected oestrogen mimics (see our cosmetics briefing *Getting Lippy* for more information).

VAT

Until comparatively recently sanitary protection was classified as a luxury item and taxed at the full VAT rate of 17.5%. Since January 2001 however, the tax on these products has been cut to a fairer 5%. They cannot be zero-rated due to a European agreement not to extend zero-rating to any products other than those already in place at the end of 1975.²

Continence

The disposable paper products industry is focusing increasingly on adult continence wear.³ As of 2001, the market was already worth £18 million, and this figure is set to increase. WEN is starting a campaign to raise awareness of the washable alternatives available and to help break down the taboos associated specifically with continence issues.

Please contact WEN for more information.

Just a wad of cotton?

Despite being whiter-than-white, disposable sanpro products are NOT sterile.

Tampons are made from either cotton, or a mixture of cotton and rayon. Use of cotton raises issues of fair trade, pesticide use and genetic modification (see below). Rayon is chemically processed from wood pulp. Disposable sanitary towels and panty liners are also made mostly from wood pulp, bleached from its natural brown colour. Elemental chlorine gas was originally the bleaching agent used, and was a source of dioxin, a known human carcinogen.^{9, 11, 26} WEN's first campaign persuaded manufacturers to change the bleaching method; they now use either chlorine dioxide or hydrogen peroxide.²² As a result of this

and reduced use of chlorine in other processes, dioxin levels in the environment are tending to fall. However, dioxins are still occasionally detectable, in trace amounts, in mill effluents and pulp.^{8, 27}



Flush nothing but human waste and loo paper, as these posters and a video from Scottish Water stress.

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 in did.¹⁴

Symptoms of TSS are flu-like and can include:

- high temperature • vomiting • diarrhoea • sore throat • aching muscles • headache/stiff or tender neck • dizziness and fainting • sunburn-like rash.

The case for organic cotton

Buying 100% organic cotton tampons reduces pesticide use and avoids inadvertently using products containing GM cotton. It also supports the development of organic cotton production, where farmers can safely grow food crops between the cotton and reduce their families' exposure to pesticides.

Cotton production accounts for more than 10% of world pesticide use and exposes growers and pickers, wildlife and the environment to poisoning. In developing countries, up to 14% of

occupational injuries and 10% of fatal injuries in the agricultural sector are due to pesticides.³⁷ Pesticide residues may be found in non-organic cotton.

Non-organic tampons may contain GM cotton. Manufacturers have told WEN they cannot separate GM and conventional cotton in the supply chain.¹⁹ Current labelling laws mean they don't have to state whether their products contain GM material.

In 1999 WEN questioned whether GM cotton in tampons posed any health



4m flushes a day

Our used sanitary products are either incinerated, dumped in a landfill site, or flushed out to sea. Pollutants are released into our environment both through sewage waste and air pollution.

- The average woman uses approximately 12,000 tampons or sanitary towels in her lifetime.¹⁷
- In 1999, around 2.5 million tampons, 1.4 million sanitary towels and 700,000 pantliners were flushed down the toilet every day.¹⁵
- Even with modern screening techniques, some sewage related debris (SRD), smaller items like plastic backing strips from towels, can still pass through the system.
- The *Bag It and Bin It* campaign, which WEN helped start in 1995, is steering people away from flushing their sanitary waste.
- Beachwatch recorded a decrease of SRD on Britain's beaches from 14% of all debris in 1996 to 6.7% in 2001;⁴ but...
- ... on average, more than 14 towels/pantliners and four tampon applicators per kilometre of beach, were found during the Beachwatch survey weekend.⁴
- 'Flushable' disposables can still cause sewage blockages - bagging and binning is the best option.

risks for users. In 2001 a European Commission scientific committee investigating the use of GM cotton in items including sanpro stated that, despite having 'no real data', they saw 'no reason for any additional risk'. However they conceded that they 'cannot unequivocally rule out increased risks'.³²

For more on pesticides, contact Pesticides Action Network UK. For more on GM, see WEN's Gene Files.

Reusable sanpro

Various reusable options are available. For internal use menstrual cups are a well-established alternative to tampons and have been used for decades. Two types are available, the Keeper (natural rubber) and the Mooncup (soft silicone). Both are available in two sizes (Before and After vaginal childbirth), and come with a three-month money back guarantee.

Menstrual sponges are another internal option. WEN does not recommend these 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 bacteria¹.

Washable towels are increasingly available, and there is a range of options out there, in different shapes, sizes, materials, absorbencies – and colours! Who said menstrual products have to be white? Easy to care for, they can simply be soaked after use and washed with the rest of your laundry. Washable panty liners are also now available. See our regularly updated Stocklist (enclosed), or website for a list of shops and suppliers.

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). Remember when ordering or making your own, synthetic fabrics and dyes may trigger a sensitive reaction.



WEN's disposal bag - available from Natural Collection.



Mooncup - a menstrual cup made from silicone.



The Keeper - a menstrual cup made from natural rubber.

Further reading and useful resources

For links to useful websites and organisations visit www.wen.org.uk/sanpro.

A full list of references for this briefing (indicated by small numbers in the text) can be downloaded from the website.

The Sanitary Protection Scandal

Alison Costello, Bernadette Vallely & Josa Young, WEN, 1989 ISBN 0 951 4297 0 1. The book that blew the lid on disposable paper products and launched WEN. Note: out of print, but you should be able to order it from your local library. If not WEN has a reference copy available.

The Curse. Confronting the Last Taboo: Menstruation

Karen Houppert, Profile Books Ltd, 1999 ISBN 1 86197 212 1

First Moon: Celebrating the onset of menstruation

Anke Mai, published by Anke Mai, 2000 (Reprinted 2002).

The Gene Files: Resource and Action Pack

WEN 1999. £5 or download from www.wen.org.uk

Silent Invaders: Pesticides, Livelihoods and Women's Health

Eds. Miriam Jacobs and Barbara Dinham, Zed Books & PAN UK, 2003, ISBN 1 85649 996 0

The Uterine Crisis

Ilya Sandra PhD, 1stBooks (2003) ISBN 1 4107 4104 4

The Wise Wound: Menstruation & Everywoman

Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove (Revised Edition), Paladin (1986) ISBN 0 586 08535 1

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.

Individual membership (women & men)

£20 ordinary

£12 unwaged

£40 supporting

Affiliate membership (organisations)

£35-150 depending on size.

Produced by Jo Budd, Manda Helal, Antonia James, Liz Sutton.
With thanks to Ann Link and Helen Lynn.

