

Code Red: Plastic in Disguise

Every woman goes through that time of the month. Menstruation is one of the most natural, healthy, and inevitable parts of life. However, for many, it is associated with pain and negativity, shrouded in secrecy and silence. The social taboos surrounding our monthly bleed, misconceptions, and lack of information regarding what's actually inside the products, have stemmed into various consequences. A tampon or pad might seem like a tiny, insignificant issue. However, single-use menstrual products contain plastics that can affect your health and also have a significant environmental impact.



Cellulose bandages from World War 1- Used to make the first disposable pads

Before disposable period products were invented, women DIY'd their own pads using any absorbent material they could get hold of, whether it was rags, cotton, wool, wood pulp, and the list goes on. You can imagine that these materials would give off an unpleasant scent after it was used, and were not very effective in preventing leaks as they were bulky, unsanitary, and uncomfortable to use. It was until the French nurses in World War 1 observed that the cellulose bandages were very effective in absorbing blood and were cheap enough to throw away after use, thus inventing the first disposable pads. The first commercially available tampons were sold in the 1930s and were made of cotton fibers and cords, accompanied by a paperboard applicator. Both of these products have improved drastically over time, adopting new materials, absorbents, and designs (wings!) through the advancement of technology and research, making our lives simpler, more hygienic, and more comfortable. Yet, one of the materials that are most commonly used nowadays is plastic, which is problematic for both our health and the earth. According to the Women's Environmental Network, not including the packaging, 6% of tampons and 90% of pads are made of plastic. The majority of the tampons in New Zealand are coated with polyester, polypropylene, and polyethylene to give them their smooth exterior coating. They come individually wrapped with plastic or encased in a plastic applicator, with a plastic string attached to one end. On the other hand, Pads use Super Absorbent Polymer as an absorbent material, polyethylene for the back cover to make it waterproof, and polypropylene on the top sheet to keep it dry. These plastics get direct contact with a woman's vaginal passage, which is a very sensitive and absorptive part of the body. They're endocrine disruptors that can mess up the hormones in the body and could cause cancer. Furthermore, these products contain more chemical ingredients, residues, coatings, and fragrances which are also linked to cancer, endocrine disruption, reproductive toxicity, and skin irritation.

The plastic problem is a substantial environmental issue that using single-use period products contributes to. The pads and tampons are thrown away but never actually biodegrade. Instead, they break down into smaller and smaller pieces. According to Menstrual Health Alliance India, one sanitary pad could take 500 to 800 years to decompose. The microplastics (defined as pieces smaller than 5 mm) derived from various types of plastics found predominantly in the menstrual products we use are polluting our beaches and oceans. According to Oi founder Helen Robinson, "In Europe, menstrual products are currently the fifth most common item found on beaches – more widespread than single-use coffee cups, cutlery or straws." In New Zealand, the average woman goes through 11,000 sanitary products in her lifetime. This translates to approximately 200kgs of period products getting thrown away in a lifetime for one woman. That is a huge amount of plastic-filled period products sitting in landfills, clogging up our waterways, and contaminating our beaches and oceans. In the UK, approximately 4.8 pieces of menstrual waste are found per 100m of beach cleaned. The incorrect disposal of pads and tampons by flushing them down the

toilet is also affecting the environment. In early May of 2021, an incident occurred in West Auckland where a blockage from non-flushable items led to wastewater overflow, polluting a stream. Out of these items included a large number of period products.

With all these various problems that have arisen from unsustainable disposal and the plastics found inside sanitary products, there are alternatives to reduce the amount of plastic waste in our environment. Menstrual cups are a great solution in creating a more green environment. Not only are they reusable for 10 years without the need for a monthly purchase, they are also



Tampons floating in wastewater overflow in Rānui, West Auckland

affordable. Women have an average of 456 periods in their lifetime. Imagine the number of one-time use pads and tampons you would have to buy and throw away when that time of the month comes rolling around the corner, costing you tens of thousands of dollars in a lifetime. Furthermore, reusable pads and tampon applicators are also very cost-effective solutions in reducing excessive plastic usage. They are easy to use, accessible online, in supermarkets, pharmacies, cosmetic stores, and are environmentally friendly. Lastly, another way you can make a difference in reducing plastic waste is by wearing washable period underwear. This way, you won't even need to buy tampons or pads ever again.

It is evident that the costs of consuming single-use periods and pads outweigh the benefits. We as consumers should be more aware of the consequences of using and throwing away the items we use in everyday life. The increase in plastic waste will inevitably damage the world, so by using these methods, you'd be saving both the environment and your purses, a win-win situation!

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Image URLs

<https://za.pinterest.com/pin/473792823282749452/> - Bandage Image

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/125109479/wastewater-overflow-sees-human-waste-tampons-and-wipes-flood-auckland-reserve> - Wastewater Overflow Image