

# TOXIC FREE PERIODS

ECO-FRIENDLY  
HEALTHY  
PLASTIC-FREE  
PERIODS



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## THE RIGHT TO DECENT MENSTRUAL HEALTH

If there is one issue at the intersection of health, environment (waste) and women's empowerment\* it is our menstruation. In the Netherlands, both among the public and among policymakers, little attention is still paid to the environmental and health problems associated with our periods. There is also a great lack of knowledge on the subject of menstruation itself. More than three in four young people between the ages of 12 and 15 say they know little or nothing about menstruation. If you don't know much about something, you're prone to believing old wives' tales and silly jokes. At home, but also at school, little or no information is taught about the menstrual cycle. Our modern life is also completely out of tune with our menstruation. If you are in physical pain, you are expected to take a painkiller and not complain. Living according to our natural rhythm no longer fits into our society.

The right to decent menstrual health is fundamental for women\* and girls\*. Indeed, your period is an important indicator of your health and well-being. Menstruation is part of life. It is part of female fertility and marks the transition from girl\* to woman\*. In many cultures, the first menstruation is celebrated. But unfortunately for some, the first menstruation begins with misery, pain and most of all, shame. Many women\* associate menstruation with pain and negativity, with secrecy and silence. It might seem that because there is so much publicity around menstruation in the Netherlands, that it is no longer taboo. However, for most women\* openness about menstruation is still pretty uncomfortable. #PeriodPositivity is not yet a matter of course for everyone.

### #SMASHTHETABOO

The way menstrual products are sold, used, advertised and thrown away perpetuates age-old taboos. The idea that menstruation is dirty is perpetuated in adverts that use unnatural blue liquid, suggesting that menstrual blood is somewhat different from the blood in the rest of your body. The feminine "hygiene industry" has been successful in convincing women\* in many countries, both in the West and the global South, to keep their periods hidden. Think of how you have contributed to this. Have you ever handed your colleague or girlfriend a tampon as if you were involved in an illegal drug transaction? The downside of this is that we put so much energy into the shame we have grown up with from an early age that we pay little attention to the damage that tampons and menstrual pads can possibly do to our health and to the environment.

**Inclusive use of language is important. That is why we use women\* when we talk about women in all their diversity. By using women\*, we want to recognise the diverse experiences and identities of women\*, regardless of gender, gender, choice of partner, class, education, race, origin or religion.**

### #PERIODPOVERTY

In addition to possible health problems, period poverty is also a major problem. Many women\* do not dare to admit that they do not have the money to buy menstrual products. Research by Plan Nederland shows that almost 9% of women\* and girls\* in the Netherlands have too little money for menstrual products. The same research concludes that almost half of women\* and girls\* in the Netherlands feel dirty when menstruating.

One third of those surveyed in the survey said they felt ashamed when they first had their period.

### #BLOODYSERIOUS



In addition to this double taboo on menstruation, there are two other taboos that remain underexposed in the current social debate: the environmental and health aspects. Disposable menstrual products are not only harmful to the environment, as landfill waste and polluter of our sewers, beaches and oceans, but they may also be harmful to our health. Producers do not have to disclose the ingredients they use. In addition, the taboo on menstruation also has a huge impact on the products we use. A changing social and cultural attitude towards our periods could have a major impact on both our own health and on our mountains of waste. For example, greater openness would make wearing healthier options such as washable menstrual pads so much easier and more accessible.

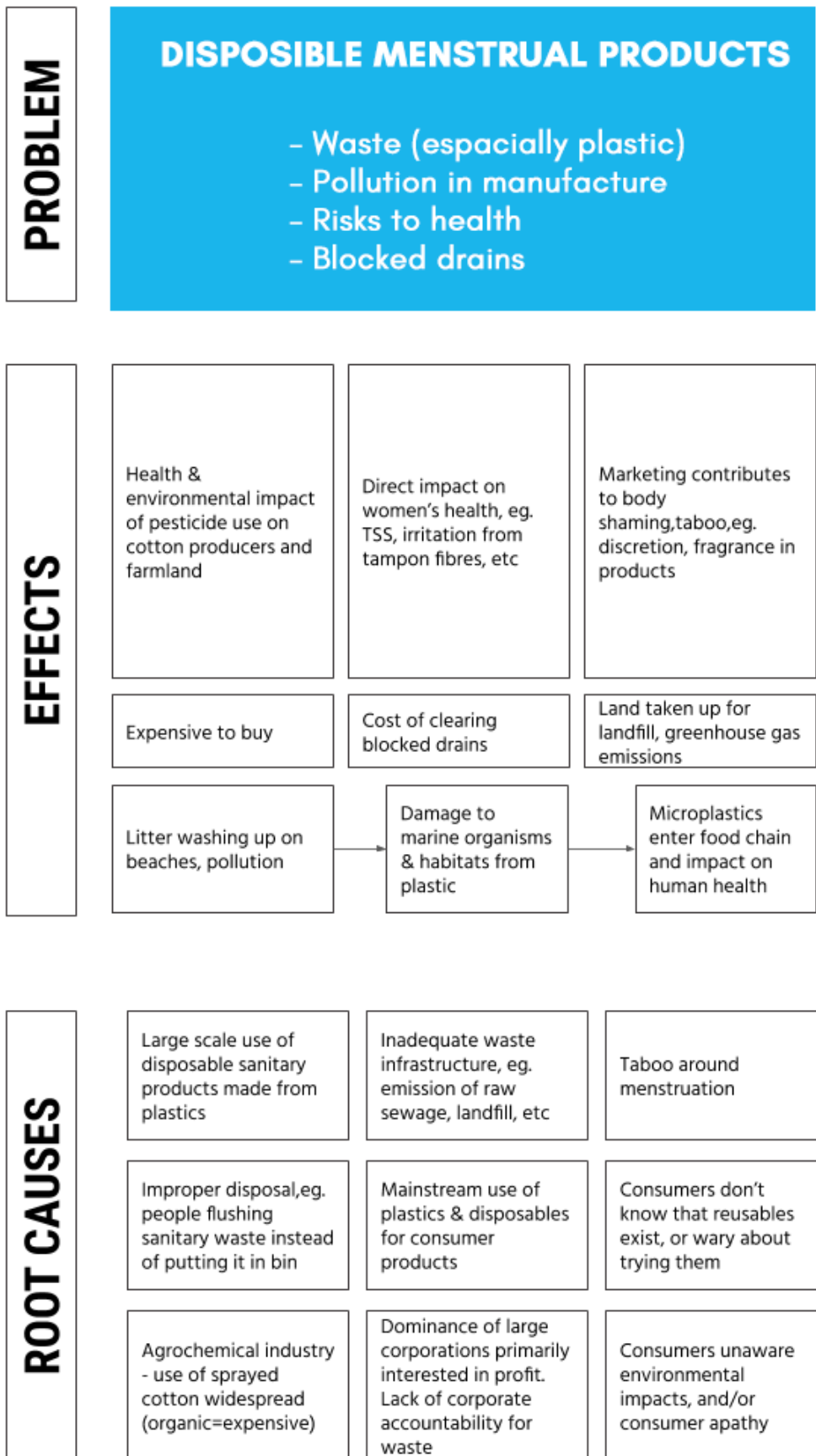
### WE CAN TURN THE TIDE

At WECF we recently decided to replace the term menstrual hygiene (Menstrual Hygiene) with menstrual health (Menstrual Health). For us, the word hygiene evoked stigmas that we wanted to get rid of. The words you choose and use have a lot of influence so if we want to break this taboo, using a new term is a good start. *Menstrual health it is!*

With this publication we therefore not only want to inform people who menstruate, but also encourage the use of more sustainable, safer and cheaper alternatives. We would like to work towards more openness, more facts and more

knowledge about menstruation, with a particular focus on the environmentally polluting and unfair aspects of 'common' menstrual products and habits. Would you like to contribute to this as well? Discuss it in your own environment. Make it a normal topic in your home, don't make it a "thing" that you have to avoid with a lot of discomfort.

After all, openness is good for the women's cause, the environment and our health.



# THE GROWING MOUNTAIN OF WASTE

## #ZEROWASTE

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

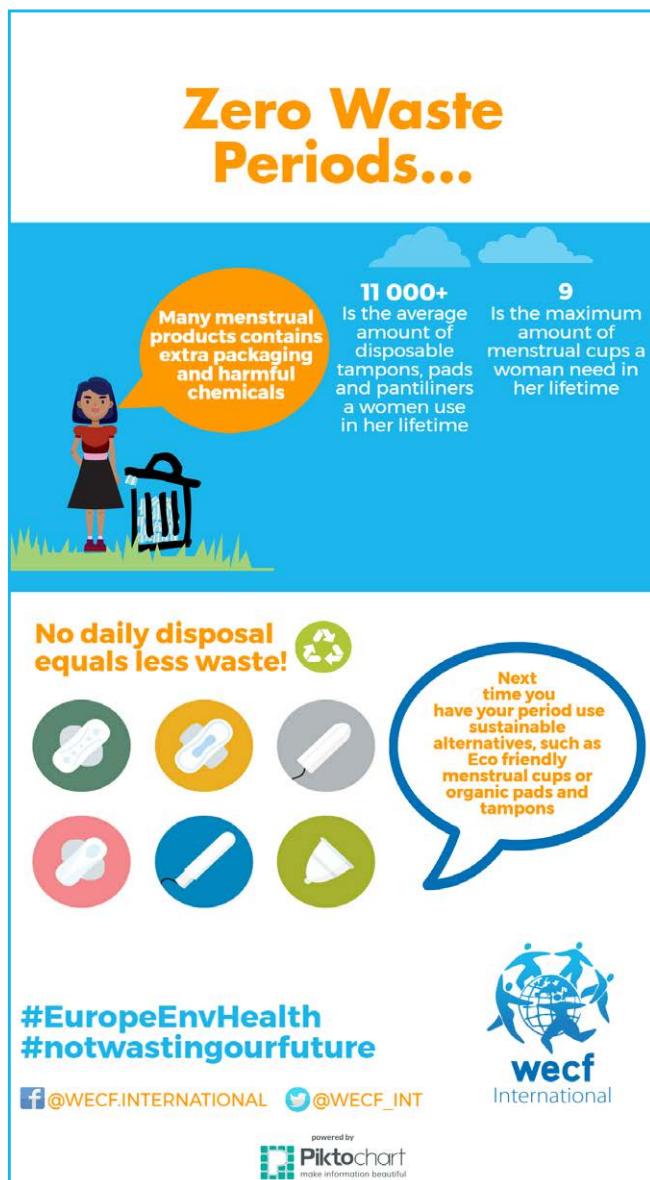
Nowadays, single-use menstrual products are commonplace. Menstrual pads and tampons in particular are promoted in advertisements on the one hand as a convenience product, as a step towards liberating women, and on the other hand as something dirty and embarrassing that must be kept secret. The taboo on menstruation has a huge impact on the products we use, how we use them and, above all, how we dispose of them. We quickly put tampons and menstrual pads away in a fragrant plastic bag in the waste basket, or we might flush the tampon down the toilet for lack of a waste bin. We then close our eyes to the bad sides of menstrual products; the enormous mountain of waste, the clogged sewers, the menstrual pads washed up on our beaches and the fact that menstrual products are often not good for our health.

### NINETY KILOS OF RESIDUAL WASTE PER WOMAN\*

In the Netherlands, the average woman uses between 11 and 16 thousand menstrual products in her life: tampons, menstrual pads, panty liners, often packaged individually. This creates a lot of waste. Milieu Centraal's study found that in one woman's\* lifetime, she produces 90kg of waste from menstrual pads, and 60kg of waste from tampons. It takes more than a hundred years for a piece of menstrual pad or tampon applicator to break down. And there is plastic in or around each part. A common piece of menstrual pad even consists of 90% plastic. This plastic ends up in landfills, in the sea, in our rivers and on our beaches. The use of all regular non-organic disposable products is therefore a very unsustainable activity that generates hundreds of kgs of non-recyclable waste per person. If no measures are taken, the production of disposable menstrual products will only increase in the coming years. Scientific research shows that girls' periods are getting younger and younger. In addition, the ageing of the population is also leading to an increase in the demand for pantyliners and incontinence material. Together, this creates an even greater mountain of waste.

### The growing mountain of waste

Soiled regular non-organic tampons and menstrual pads are part of residual waste: they cannot be recycled. This increases their environmental impact



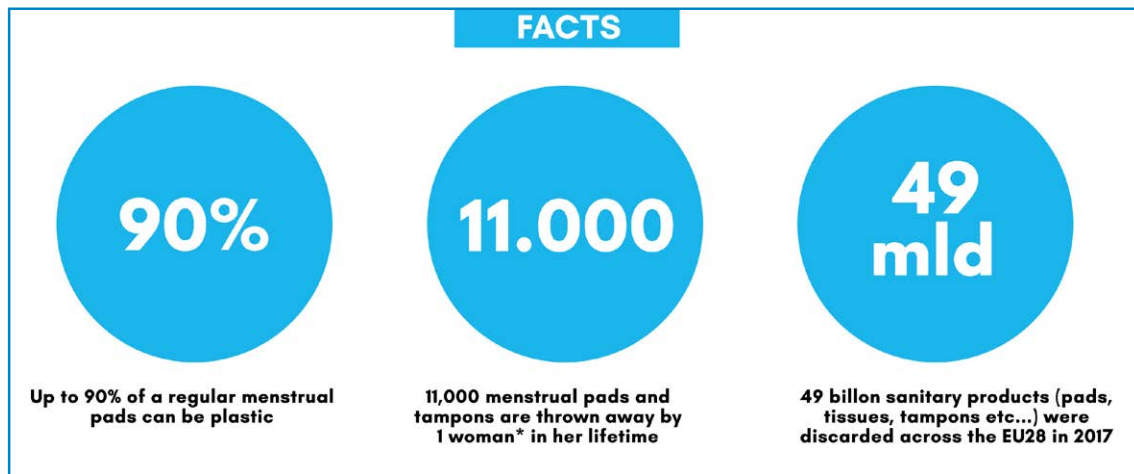
compared to reusable variants. However, flushing them down the toilet is not the solution! This will clog up the sewers. And instead of ending up in a landfill, your piece of menstrual pad will end up on a beach somewhere. At the moment it is not so easy to reduce this waste heap. Alternatives cannot be found everywhere, and biodegradable alternatives weigh heavily on the budgets of many women\*.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the consequences of current production, consumption and disposal of single-use products such as menstrual pads, tampons, incontinence pads and wet wipes. Because of their major contribution to municipal waste streams and because of the ecological, economic and social consequences of this waste stream, these items require special attention.

Governments, too, could save

a lot of money with waste disposal, if policies and regulations would encourage the use of sustainable alternatives. Although the market for reusable products in Europe has gradually increased in recent years, single-use products dominate the market. Disposable menstrual products are not covered by the new European SUP (Single Use Plastics Directive) regulation. And there is a good reason for this. Many women's organisations initially feared that menstrual products would become unaffordable for many women\* and girls. However, WECF advocates not taxing biological or sustainable alternatives and, together with 30 other organisations, called on the European Commission to establish the right to hygienic menstruation for all, with access to menstrual products for all.





## RESEARCH FROM BREAK FREE FROM PLASTIC

To map the waste mountain, the global network Break Free from Plastic, in collaboration with various partners including WECF, investigated the impact of disposable sanitary products on the growing waste mountain across Europe in 2019. Comparative studies in 28 EU Member States, with 2017 as the reference year, found the following:

- More than 49 billion units of menstrual products were used, equivalent to an annual production of about 590,000 tonnes of waste
- Around 33 billion single-use baby nappies were used, resulting in 6,731,000 tonnes of waste per year
- Around 68 billion individual wet wipes were used, equivalent to 511,000 tonnes of waste per year

Disposable menstrual products, like baby nappies and wet wipes, have serious consequences throughout their life cycle, from the production stage to the end of life:

- Material, water and energy usage: the effects generated during the production process of these products are mainly due to the use of large quantities of wood pulp, cotton or viscose rayon for the production of super absorbent polymer (SAP) and other components such as polyester, polyethylene, polypropylene, adhesives, fragrances and dyes. In addition, significant amounts of water and energy are used in the production process.
- CO<sub>2</sub> emissions: Disposable sanitary products contribute significantly to global warming. It is estimated that these products emit about 3.3 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> throughout their life cycle, including production and transport, whilst incontinence and menstrual products emit about 245,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year.

- **Waste production:** Recycling is difficult and expensive due to the composition of products made from mixed materials and the presence of organic material after use. This is why in Europe, these products usually end up in landfills (87%) or are incinerated (13%), wasting resources and creating negative environmental impacts (groundwater and soil pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, etc.). Waste generation from single-use menstrual products, baby nappies and wet wipes accounts for about 7,832,000 tonnes (equivalent to 15.3 kg per inhabitant per year) within the EU-28. This amount of waste accounts for about 7% of municipal waste streams.
- **Marine litter:** Disposable menstrual products and wet wipes are often flushed down the toilet after use. This allows them to enter the marine environment via the wastewater system, which has major ecological and economic consequences. Single-use menstrual products and wet wipes are the most common single-use plastic items in the marine environment (6.2% of the waste collected on British beaches or 5% of the floating waste off the Catalan coast) and when they fall apart in the sea, they disperse a considerable amount of microplastics into the water, as we will read later.



### Waste prevention

The above figures show the importance of waste prevention. For example, the use of a single menstrual cup already results in a 99% reduction in waste compared to the use of single-use products. If only 20% of users would opt for a single-use menstrual cup instead of menstrual products, the amount of waste in the EU-28 could be reduced by almost 100,000 tonnes per year. Similarly, a family opting for washable



baby nappies would also save about 99% of the waste that would otherwise be generated by disposable nappies. If only 20% of baby parents switched to using washable nappies, more than 1 million tonnes of waste per year would be saved in the EU-28.

### Compost

Do you use organic tampons and menstrual pads? These do not have to end up in the waste mountain either. You can just **compost** them. If you use products from Natracare or Yoni, for example, you will find the list of ingredients on the packaging. Cut up the used products and make sure you have a good mix of green (fruit and vegetables) and brown (cardboard, menstrual pads) compost. After a year and a half you will have perfect compost for your balcony or garden.

### Economic savings

Switching to products for longer use, such as the menstrual cup, also cuts costs. The research mentioned above also shows that using a menstrual cup leads to annual savings of between € 18 and € 119 per person. That is as much as € 4,400 over a lifetime. The use of reusable nappies also saves between € 200 and € 2,000 per family compared to single-use nappies. This saving even increases if the reusable baby nappies are used for siblings or bought second hand.

In addition, period poverty can be reduced. Statistics show, where available, that almost one in five women cannot buy single-use menstrual products every month. This has a major impact on their quality of life.

Given the potential economic savings that reusable menstrual products can bring, making sustainable menstrual products widely available, accessible and affordable across the EU could be a great help both in reducing waste and reducing period poverty. It should be noted that while comparable, investing in a cup or reusable nappies is, of course, much cheaper, it is often too much of a one-off expense for women\*, parents and girls living in poverty. There are also certain groups, such as the homeless, who do not have a safe place to hygienically change a cup, or to wash washable sanitary napkins, and still rely on disposable products.

Waste prevention management leads to major cost savings not just for consumers, but also local authorities, in the area of waste disposal and keeping the beach and sea clean. In regards to the maintenance and unblocking of sewage plants, it is estimated that the cost of waste treatment for sewage waste disposed of in waste water treatment plants in the European Union amounts to between € 500 - € 1,000 million per year. In addition, costs are often even higher in coastal communities because they also have to dispose of waste from the beach. In the UK, the disposal of single-use menstrual products, wet wipes and other related waste is estimated to cost around € 1.1 million a year. Unfortunately, there are no figures on this in the Netherlands. Even though the municipality of Amsterdam sounded the alarm last year when the sewerage system on Yburg failed due to the large number of hygiene products flushed down the toilet. The municipality of Amsterdam then announced that the sewer was only intended for the 3 Ps: pee, poop and (toilet) paper.

## WHAT ARE MENSTRUAL PADS AND TAMPONS MADE OF?

### #PLASTICFREEPERIODS

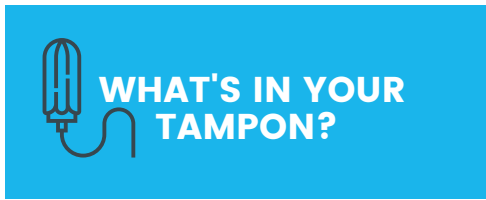
Almost your entire pack of menstrual pads or tampons contains plastic. Both the pad itself and the packaging and applicators. It is almost all made of plastic. In addition, most tampons and pads are individually – and unnecessarily – wrapped in plastic, although menstrual pads and tampons are not classified as medical devices in the EU, so this doesn't apply to pads and tampons.

### WHAT IS IN A MENSTRUAL PAD?

To be honest, we do not know exactly because the manufacturers of common menstrual pads and tampons are not obliged to supply a list of ingredients. There are a number of things we do know. It is important that a piece of menstrual pad absorbs blood well, does not leak and is gentle on your skin. That is why it consists of a number of layers, each with a different function. The top layer consists of **polyethylene**, **polypropylene**, **polyester** and/or **cotton**, sometimes supplemented with some oil or lotion. The layer underneath has the function of directing the blood to the core of the menstrual pad, which reduces the risk of leakage. This layer consists of **polyethylene**, **polyester**, and/or **polypropylene**, or **cellulose**. The core of a sanitary pad consists of **cellulose fibres**, so-called **fluff pulp**, or **cotton**. Sometimes this layer contains **super-absorbent polymers (SAP)**, which are grains that, in contact with moisture, expand into a kind of gel. Furthermore, this layer contains **emulsifiers**, **fragrances**, **colour pigments**, or **hydrating substances**, which ensure that water is retained in the outer layers. Beneath this is a **silicone paper** or **polyethylene/polypropylene** layer, which is impermeable to moisture and prevents leakage. The bottom layer then consists of **glue**, which ensures that the menstrual pad sticks to your pants. All in all, a menstrual pad can be made up of up to 90 % plastic. Many items are also packaged individually in **plastic** or **bioplastic**.

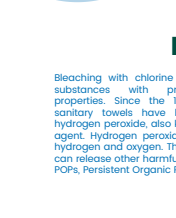
### AND WHAT DOES A TAMPON CONTAIN?

Disposable tampons consist of a core of **viscose** and/or **cotton** with a permeable outer layer made of **PE (polyethylene)** and/or **PP (polypropylene)** or an extra layer of **cotton**. The string is made of **polyester**, **PP**, **cotton** and/or **viscose**. Sometimes tampons also



## PESTICIDE RESIDUES

Regular tampons consist mainly of cotton. Large quantities of toxic pesticides are used in non-organic cotton cultivation. As much as 25% of the insecticide use and 90% of the pesticide use is accounted for by cotton cultivation. This creates contamination of drinking water and food, which can cause people in the area to develop all kinds of health problems. Pesticide residues can also have consequences for your own health when using tampons containing these residues. Unfortunately, this has not really been researched yet.



## DIOXINS

Bleaching with chlorine can release dioxins, substances with proven carcinogenic properties. Since the 1990s, tampons and sanitary towels have been bleached with hydrogen peroxide, also known as a bleaching agent. Hydrogen peroxide is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen. The problem is that this can release other harmful substances, such as POPs, Persistent Organic Pollutants.



## FRAGRANCES

Fragrances can disturb the balance between good and bad bacteria, trigger allergic reactions or simply cause irritation. Synthetic fragrances can be made from a cocktail of up to 3,900 chemicals. Some of them may even be carcinogenic, neurotoxic, endocrine disrupting and / or harmful to reproduction. Would you like to have a scent like that in your underpants?



## PLASTIC

A tampon contains a lot of plastic. The problem with plastic is that, unfortunately, it never goes away. It eventually falls apart into smaller and smaller pieces until nothing else remains than microplastics, pieces of plastic smaller than 5mm. Microplastics pollute our nature, affect biodiversity and, moreover, the effects of microplastics on our health are still insufficiently known.



WANT TO READ MORE: [HTTPS://WWW.WECF.ORG/MENSTRUATIONMATTERS](https://www.wecf.org/menstruationmatters)

contain perfume, fragrances, to prevent unwanted odours. The outer softer layer ensures that the blood is absorbed and makes insertion and removal easy. Tampons are also packaged individually, in **plastic** or **bioplastic**. The latter may not be made from petroleum, but from natural materials, but that does not necessarily mean that it is automatically biodegradable.

## AND WHAT ARE THESE SUBSTANCES?

### Plastics

Let us start with plastics produced from oil. So, as has already been written, one pad can be made up of up to 90% plastic, the rest of the pad contains wood pulp. Tampons contain less plastic and consist of a mixture of plastic, cotton and rayon. Tampon applicators, on the other hand, are usually made of **polyethylene (PE)** and **polypropylene (PP)**. And even the string attached to the tampon is mostly made of plastic. The problem with plastic is that it never disappears. It eventually falls apart into smaller and smaller pieces until there is nothing left but microplastics, pieces of plastic smaller than 5mm. Microplastics

pollute our nature, affect biodiversity and the effects of microplastics on our health are not yet sufficiently known. Microplastics can be found on our beaches and in the ocean from the decomposition of plastic waste or from the washing of synthetics from our washing machines. But you also find them, deliberately added, in our cosmetics. PE and PP are two of the main plastics found in our oceans. Unfortunately, just swapping plastic for biodegradable plastic is not the solution. Bioplastics also pose a threat to the environment because they can end up in the stomach of a sea creature just as easily in the ocean.

## Cotton

Cotton is soft, breathable and absorbent. A big disadvantage of cotton is that it is absolutely not environmentally friendly. Growing cotton requires a lot of land. A lot of water is used in cotton cultivation, cotton plantations are often located in areas where water is scarce. And especially in (non-organic) cotton cultivation, large quantities of toxic pesticides are used. As much as 25% of the worldwide, annual insecticide use and 90% of the pesticide use is accounted for by cotton cultivation. The use of these pesticides causes polluted drinking water and food, causing all sorts of health problems for people in the surrounding area. Residues of pesticides can therefore also be found in tampons. Although often in minimal quantities. Cotton workers are exposed to toxic substances all day long. The majority of these workers are women, who continue to work during pregnancy and breastfeeding, causing health damage not only to themselves but also to their children. Choosing organic cotton tampons is a step in the right direction for that reason alone. However, the proportion of organic cotton in the world is only around 3%.

## Rayon

Rayon, formerly known as artificial silk and nowadays as viscose, is an artificially manufactured fibre based on cellulose, a natural raw material extracted, for example, from bamboo or eucalyptus wood pulp. Compared to cotton, it has a less green image because it is industrially produced, but its origin is just as natural. Rayon is known for its super absorbent properties. Tampons with a lot of rayon are known for their absorbency. However, this can also involve risks because you could be tempted to leave a tampon in for hours. However, this can be dangerous because of the risk of bacterial growth and, if used for a very long time, even Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), a rare but serious infection. One of the causes of this disease can be the misuse of a tampon, especially the habit of leaving in highly absorbent tampons too long. For this reason, the use of highly absorbent tampons is also advised against.

## ADDITIVES AND AUXILIARIES

### Plasticisers

Because plastic is made from oil, conventional menstrual pads may contain petrochemical additives that can have hormone-disrupting effects on humans and animals.

**Phthalates**, or plasticisers such as **Bisphenol A** and **Bisphenol S**, is known to disrupt hormone function

and lead to health problems. Phthalates can also be released from a product during use.

### Fragrances

Some menstrual products contain fragrances that can disturb the balance between good and bad bacteria. Synthetic fragrances can be made from a cocktail of up to 3,900 chemicals (**styrene, chloromethane, chloroform, acetone**, among others). In addition, some fragrances have been identified as carcinogenic (carcinogenic), neurotoxic, endocrine disrupting and reprotoxic (harmful to reproduction). Apart from that, for many people, fragrances are simply irritating because they trigger allergic reactions or can alter the pH balance in your body.

### Brominated flame retardants

Scientists have also been concerned about brominated flame retardants over the last 20 years. These **BFRs (brominated flame retardants)** are used to make plastic heat resistant and are mainly found in electronics, synthetic foam, textiles and furniture. And unfortunately, also in tampons. Without knowing what the consequences are for our health, the amount of BFRs in the environment is only increasing. Vulnerable populations, such as children, are probably the most sensitive to the effects of BFRs, and some BFRs, such as **PBDE (poly-brominated diphenyl ethers)** have been found in breast milk. BFRs have been associated with neurological disorders and are thought to adversely affect the development of immune systems and thyroid hormones.

### Bleaching agent

All raw materials for tampons are bleached, hence the bright-white colour. Previously, tampons were bleached using chlorine gas. However, bleaching with chlorine can release dioxins, substances with proven carcinogenic properties. Since the 1990s, tampons and sanitary napkins have been bleached with hydrogen peroxide, also known as a bleaching agent. Hydrogen peroxide is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen. The only problem is that POPs, Persistent Organic Pollutants, can still be released in this process. This method is called ECF, Elementary Chlorine Free. However, biological brands go for the strictest method, TCF, Totally Chlorine Free.



## COTTON CULTIVATION IN KARAPALKASTAN, UZBEKISTAN

**Much of our cotton comes from Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic, and now a dictatorship, in Central Asia. WECF worked in Uzbekistan for many years until, in recent years, the regime has made it virtually impossible for us to work there without endangering our partners there in the women's and environmental organisations.**



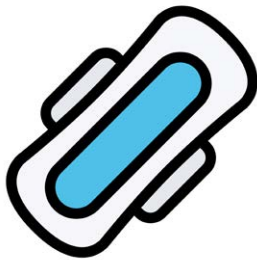
In the nineties, WECF started working with the NGO Present, led by an Uzbek gynaecologist. The region around Lake Aral was completely dehydrated and agricultural <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/31180930> poison from cotton cultivation slowly polluted the remaining water and soil. To make matters worse, Uzbeks were forced to work in the cotton fields where small planes sprayed the land with pesticides. Even when women and children were present on the fields. WECF therefore set up a scientific study in 1998 with the help of an Uzbek paediatrician and gynaecologist, a team of Dutch researchers from the RIVM, and Professor Janna Koppe (neonatologist at the AMC) and Professor Rudi Boersma (paediatrician at the University of Groningen). This research

showed that the pesticides were found in the umbilical cord blood of babies. The poison affected the immune system of children, caused pregnancy problems and reduced fertility. Nevertheless, the Uzbek government did not change its policy. It was distressing. Cotton cultivation still continues on the same footing.

Together with NGO Present, WECF set up an organic farm where women from Chimbay could grow organic fruit and vegetables for the schools in the area. And together with the NGO, a series of eco-toilet complexes were built for schools so that girls could not only go to school safely, but the compost from these toilets also provided raw material for the vegetable gardens.

## OUR HEALTH

There are women who prefer alternatives such as washable pads because they are worried about the presence of harmful substances in ordinary menstrual pads, such as bleaching and pesticide residues. However, there is as yet no major evidence of possible health effects of harmful substances in tampons and sanitary napkins. Not because they do not exist, but mainly because little scientific research has yet been done into them. However, there is strong evidence that our health is at stake: every day we are exposed in different ways to harmful residues and to the chemicals added to plastic. We already know that many of these additives are very harmful, but we do not yet know exactly what the effects are on our health. Most additives have never been tested.



### #TOXICFREEPERIOD

The Natracare and Yoni brands were also created in response to this concern. Natracare was founded by Susie Hewson in the UK because, as an environmental activist, she was angry about the growing danger of toxins being carried away into water, soil and air from chlorine bleached tampons and menstrual pads. In the Netherlands it was Mariah Mansvelt Beck, founder of the Yoni brand, who started the discussion. For health reasons, she went in search of menstrual products made from organic cotton, without harmful additives. Because she could not find them, she decided to produce them herself. The text on a box of Yoni tampons leaves nothing to be desired in terms of clarity: *the toxic-free option*. Toxicologist Martin van den Berg of the Utrecht University told Dutch national newspaper Trouw that Yoni were, “creating unnecessary panic”<sup>1</sup>, and that “the maximum levels in these products are 100,000 to 1 million times lower than our daily exposure via food and what is already circulating in our bodies”. However, a spokesman for the NVOG, the professional association for gynaecologists, stated in another article in De Volkskrant that hardly any scientific research has been done into possible harmful substances in menstrual pads<sup>2</sup>.

“Whether products made from natural ingredients really are better has not yet been scientifically proven,” says Judith Huirne, gynaecologist at the Amsterdam UMC in an interview with Het Parool. “But there has been almost no research at all into menstrual products.” This also applies to the standard tampon, which has been on sale since 1934. “The fact that the effects of something so widely used have hardly been researched endorses the taboo on menstruation<sup>3</sup>”.

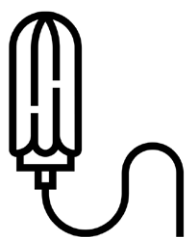
1 <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/groene-tampons-zijn-alleen-goed-voor-het-milieu~b7e53116/>

2 <https://www.volkskrant.nl/mensen/waarom-ongesteld-zijn-opeens-cool-is~b434528b/>

3 <https://www.topics.nl/duurzaam-menstrueren-is-in-opkomst-apn4513569parool/?context=zoek%2F%3Fquery%3DYoni%2520mansvelt%2520beck>

## HEALTH SURVEYS

Both the Chem Fatal Report: Potential Health Effects of Toxic Chemicals in Feminine Care Products<sup>4</sup> published by Women's Voices for the Earth in 2013, and the fact sheets of WECF partner Women Environmental Network (WEN) UK<sup>5</sup> show that the list of harmful substances that can be found in tampons, menstrual pads, wet wipes, or douches is extremely long. Every little bit adds up, they say, especially when you consider that a woman uses an average of eleven thousand tampons in her life.



**ANSES**, a French institute similar to the **RIVM** in the Netherlands, was asked by the French Ministries of Health and Economy in 2017 to assess the safety of feminine hygiene products (tampons, menstrual pads, panty liners and menstrual cups)<sup>6</sup>. The expert assessment consisted of identifying controlled or non-regulated chemical substances that may have been present in these hygiene products and assessing the associated health risks. One

of the results of the assessment was that there are no specific requirements for the composition, production or use of feminine hygiene products. It was also found that many harmful substances, with the exception of one aromatic substance, were not intentionally added to the final product. Most of the harmful substances were accidentally created during the production process or derived from raw materials. The French Agency therefore ordered manufacturers to improve the quality of the products and eliminate or minimise the presence of harmful chemicals. This applies in particular to substances which, as ANSES states, have carcinogenic (cancer causing), mutagenic or reprotoxic (CMR, fertility disrupting) or endocrine disrupting properties. The recommendations of ANSES were not regulatory.

Research into menstrual hygiene products was also carried out in Sweden<sup>7</sup> and Denmark<sup>8</sup> in 2018 by government agencies KEMI and THINK. Both studies showed that although the amount of harmful substances found was below the standard, stacking (the so-called cocktail effect) was not taken

4 <https://www.womensvoices.org/menstrual-care-products/chem-fatale-report/chem-fatale-fact-sheet/>

5 <https://www.wen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-Environmenstrual.pdf>

6 <https://www.anses.fr/en/system/files/CONSO2016SA0108EN.pdf>

7 <https://www.kemi.se/global/rapporter/2018/report-8-18-survey-of-hazardous-chemical-substances-in-feminine-hygiene-products.pdf>

8 <https://kemi.taenk.dk/bliv-groennere/test-menstrual-cups>

Product	Potentially harmful ingredients	Health risks
Tampons	Dioxins, traces of pesticides and herbicides, unknown synthetic fragrances and disulphide (in tampons made of rayon).	Carcinogenic, impairment of fertility, hormone disrupting, menstrual disorders, and allergic reactions.
Sanitary towels	Dioxins and furans, traces of pesticides and herbicides, unknown synthetic perfumes and self-adhesive chemicals such as methyldibromo glutaronitrile and BPA, phthalates and other petrochemicals.	Carcinogenic, impairment of fertility, hormone disrupting and allergic reactions.
Incontinence material	Dioxins and furans, traces of pesticides and herbicides, synthetic fragrances (butylphenylmethylpropional, hydroxyisohexyl 3-cyclohexylcarboxaldehyde), certain polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), PCB	Carcinogenic, endocrine disrupting, allergic reactions
Wet wipes	Methylchloroisothiazolinone, methylisothiazolinone, parabens, quaternium-15, dmdm Hydantoin and unknown odoriferous substances	Carcinogenic, endocrine disrupting and allergic reactions.

*Table: Potential health risks associated with ingredients found in tampons, menstrual pads, panty liners, incontinence pads and wet wipes (from research: BFFP/Rezero)*

into account. Because hygiene products are covered by the very broad European General Product Safety Directive (GPSD), there are no specific regulations for tampons and menstrual pads. In addition, some pesticide residues were found to originate from pesticides banned in Europe, such as **lindane** and **quintozene**. ECHA, the European Chemicals Agency<sup>9</sup>, has therefore requested further investigation. Although there is clear evidence of the presence of harmful chemicals in menstrual products, producers are not legally obliged to disclose all ingredients in their products due to gaps in national and international regulations. The lack of clear labelling on disposable products is worrying because menstrual pads and tampons are used in large quantities close to the skin or internally.

## #EDCFREE

### Hormone disrupters

To give plastic certain properties – such as hardness, plasticity and heat resistance – chemicals are added. Many of these chemicals, such as the infamous BPA (Bisphenol A), are so-called endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs). According to the World Health Organisation<sup>10</sup>, EDCs can be associated with gender imbalance



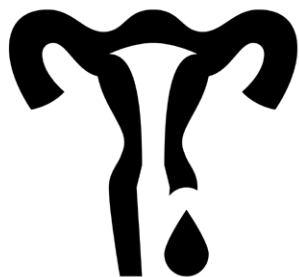
(number of boys born versus girls born), disruption of the fertility cycle, delayed or early adolescence among girls, as well as neurodevelopmental disorders in children, immune disorders and hormone-related cancers. More and more research is showing a possible link between increased exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals and the increase in certain chronic diseases and disorders.

The Dutch government is reluctant to tackle hormone-disrupting substances. WECF finds this worrying and is convinced that if no action is taken, these harmful substances will have a disruptive health effect on society. In addition, they cost Dutch society a lot of money, as the IRAS Institute has already calculated in 2016<sup>11</sup>. The total estimate is that exposure to endocrine disrupting substances could result in some € 46-288 billion per year in health costs in Europe (EU28). In recent years, we have therefore presented several studies on this theme to the Ministries of Environment and of Health, the latest in collaboration with Wemos and Plastic Soup Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> <https://chemicalsinourlife.echa.europa.eu/chemicals-in-feminine-hygiene-products>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/245744/Identification-of-risks-from-exposure-to-ENDOCRINE-DISRUPTING-CHEMICALS-at-the-country-level.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/245744/Identification-of-risks-from-exposure-to-ENDOCRINE-DISRUPTING-CHEMICALS-at-the-country-level.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/rijk\\_et\\_al\\_2016\\_-\\_report\\_iras\\_-\\_health\\_cost\\_associated\\_with\\_edcs\\_3.pdf](https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/rijk_et_al_2016_-_report_iras_-_health_cost_associated_with_edcs_3.pdf)



### Health effects

Research shows, as mentioned earlier, that a small dose of endocrine disrupting substances can already have major consequences. What is more, every day we are not exposed to a single dangerous substance but to a real chemical cocktail. And that mixture can be even more harmful than the sum of each individual chemical.

Although not much scientific research is yet available, exposure to dioxins PCBs could also affect the development of **endometriosis and PCOS**<sup>12</sup>. These substances can end up in the rest of your body via the mucous membranes in your vagina. And because the body stores dioxins, it is unfortunately unable to break them down. Dioxins are also associated with endometriosis and abnormal tissue growth in the reproductive organs. Because endometriosis tissue is very similar to the endometrial mucosa and reacts to the same hormones, the tissue is often called “endometrial-like tissue”. Once you have endometriosis, it is best not to use tampons, as the vagina is one of the most absorbent parts of the female body.

Many additives, such as phthalates, added to plastics also have a hormone disrupting effect. Phthalates are converted by the body and the metabolic products (metabolites) usually leave the body via urine. As far as we know, phthalates do not accumulate in the body<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, some studies have shown that there may be health effects, such as possible infertility and a shortened gestation period<sup>14 15</sup>.

## IS IT ALL HOPELESS THEN?

Hormone disrupting substances are everywhere and unavoidable. But the substances that disrupt the endocrine function of the body do not have the same effect on everyone. The exact effect of each substance is difficult to measure, and the cocktail effect makes it even more difficult. All we do know is that reducing exposure benefits everyone. Unfortunately, as long as we have to wait for stricter European regulations, we will have to take measures ourselves. In view of the increase in the amount of plastic in our lives, and the fact that common menstrual

12 <https://www.gezondheidsnet.nl/menstruatie/endometriose-0>

13 <https://www.womensvoices.org/2020/02/28/wait-what-now-there-are-phthalates-in-tampons-and-pads-too/>

14 Meeker, J. D., Sathyanarayana, S. & Swan, S. H. (2009). ‘Phthalates and other additives in plastics: human exposure and associated health outcomes.’ *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, 364(1526), 2097–2113.

15 Hauser, R. & Calafat, A. M. (2005). ‘Phthalates and human health.’ *Occupational and environmental medicine*, 62(11), 806–818.

products consist largely of plastic and we use them on the skin or internally, it is therefore very important that we know what is in them and what the health effects may be, so that we can make responsible choices. We are not talking about incidental exposure. Women\* use between 11,000 and 15,000 pieces of tampons or menstrual pads throughout their lives, in or on the most absorbent part of the female body, the vagina. Substances that penetrate the skin enter the bloodstream directly.

**Good research into the effects of exposure to plastic and plastic additives on our health is extremely necessary, now more than ever.**

## ALTERNATIVES!

At first glance, modern menstrual pads seem to be a blessing for women\*: comfortable, hygienic and crucial when it comes to emancipation. Why on earth would you want to go back to rags of cotton? But as you've read before, menstruation is quite an environmentally unfriendly activity: the use of tampons and sanitary napkins generates around 600 kilos of non-recyclable waste per woman's lifetime. Because many of the new alternatives are reusable, they are much more sustainable (and cheaper) than tampons and menstrual pads. Not surprisingly, sustainable menstrual products such as menstrual underwear, washable pads and menstrual cups are becoming increasingly popular.



### ORGANIC MENSTRUAL PADS AND TAMPONS

Women\* in rich countries are the world's largest consumers of plastic, but they are also making a big change from the bottom up by consciously looking for alternatives. The market for alternative menstrual options has grown enormously in recent years. If you still want to use menstrual pads, panty liners or tampons, use biodegradable made from 100% unbleached cotton. Cottons and Yoni menstrual pads are made from eco-cotton, Natracare menstrual pads are made from eco-cotton and wood pulp. For the production of the absorbent layer – just like for the production of fluff pulp – water and energy are needed. The anti-leak coatings in ecological sanitary pads are made from vegetable bioplastic, i.e. from renewable raw materials. They are biodegradable and, as you can read in the chapter on



waste, also compostable! Of course, it is still cotton. Organic cotton is better for the environment if you pay attention to the use of pesticides and water, but scores worse on land use<sup>16</sup>.

## Menstrual cups or discs

Looking for a sustainable alternative to the tampon? Then the menstrual cup or the menstrual disc <sup>17</sup> might be a good alternative. The first menstrual cups were patented as early as 1867<sup>18</sup>. It is only recently that they have been available in various variations in drugstores. Like tampons, menstrual cups are inserted into the vagina, but the blood is collected in the cup, which can hold 8 to 50 millimetres of blood<sup>19</sup>. The menstrual cup has to be emptied when it is full, which depends on the menstrual period and the type of cup. A menstrual cup is a small cup made of rubber, silicone or TPE, which is inserted into the vagina and collects the blood there.

With the right hygienic conditions, the cup is also better for the vaginal microbiome, says gynaecologist Barbara Havenith<sup>20</sup>. "Using tampons not only draws in the menstrual blood, but also many beneficial lactobacilli that belong in the vagina and protect against vaginal infections caused by candida and/or bacteria". With a menstrual cup these beneficial lactobacilli remain in the vagina. The disadvantage of the cup is that you have to rinse using warm water. Many public toilets unfortunately do not have a fountain in the toilet bowl. And if there is a fountain, there is usually only cold water.

The cups last for about five to fifteen years, but the environmental benefit is difficult to calculate, says Milieu Centraal. No plastic products end up in the sea but rinsing out the cups uses a lot of hot water and therefore energy. However, the menstrual cup is much cheaper. If you use a menstrual cup all your life, it is estimated that you would spend about € 225 rather than € 1800 on your period. In about four to eight months, you will have paid the same amount on your cup as you would have done on disposable menstrual products (the average cup costs € 20 to € 25). Some popular brands include Looncup, Divacup, OrganiCup, MamiCup and EcoCup; there are so many manufacturers that the comparison website [www.cupkiezer.nl](http://www.cupkiezer.nl) can help Dutch consumers. . And do you want to know how to insert the cup? Then demonstration videos on YouTube,

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.milieucentraal.nl/bewust-winkelen/love-your-clothes/de-impact-van-kleding/#dilemma>

<sup>17</sup> <https://cupkiezer.nl/2020/02/menstruatiedisc-en-menstruatiecups-het-verschil/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.mum.org/1867Patent.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <https://cupkiezer.nl/menstruatiecups-vergelijken/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://gezondnu.nl/dossiers/gezondheid/vrouwelijk-lichaam/menstruatie/hoe-veilig-en-milieubewust-is-de-menstruatiecup-5-vragen/>

showing the folding and spinning technique, will help. In Belgium, Aunt Rosa gives 'Copperware parties' where women can see and buy the cups. The company also receives requests from the Netherlands, but unfortunately cannot meet them.

### Natural rubber or silicone?

In 1987 The Keeper was the first (American) company that succeeded in making the menstrual cup more popular. Just like its predecessors, The Keeper is made of natural rubber. Nowadays there are dozens of players on the cup market worldwide and most of them offer a silicone cup, because some women have a latex (or rubber) allergy. Although recently a new player made of rubber also appeared on the market: Fair Squared.

The majority of menstrual cups are made of medical grade silicone, ThermoPlastic Elastomer (TPE) or ordinary silicone. Silicones are synthetic substances made from the element silicon. Silicones are polymers whose chain is formed by silicon (silica) – and oxygen atoms. Silicones are made from very finely ground gravel (sand) and oxygen. The material is strong, flexible and can withstand most cleaning agents. However, there is a big difference between silicones. If the material specifications state that they are less than 100% silicone, you can be sure that other – cheaper and harmful – plastics are present. Silicone extraction such as the manufacture of silicones is also unsustainable and has a negative effect on the environment. The extraction of minerals in China, a country that is already known for the air pollution that kills 1.6 million people every year, has an enormous impact on global warming<sup>21</sup>. But even medical silicone remains in doubt because of all the stories about leaking silicone in breast prostheses. A menstrual cup is also inserted internally. Do these silicones belong in your body? The last word has not yet been said about this either, as long as no proper research has been done on the subject.

### No alternative for developing countries

Unfortunately, the menstrual cup is not an alternative for, for example, homeless women\* and girls\* in the West. But it is also not an alternative for women\* in developing countries, as some cup producers claim. Most rural areas in developing countries, whether the countries of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia, countries in South-East Asia or in Africa, mainly have to deal with a lack of access to (sterile) water. In areas without sewerage, unhygienic pit latrines are used. Cups need to be emptied and then rinsed. And that certainly does not work in a pit latrine. The use of menstrual cups in an unhygienic environment can lead to harmful infections. The vagina is one of the most vulnerable parts of the female body and bacteria and pathogens can easily multiply in the mucous membrane.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20964129.2019.1577703>

As WECF, we therefore also work in our project work to raise awareness about menstrual health<sup>22</sup>, through our WSSP Programme<sup>23</sup>, and build urine-separating dry compost toilets, which, unlike pit latrines, can be built in or at home, keeping water sources free of pathogens.

### Washable menstrual pads

Another alternative is washable menstrual pads. If it is made from **organic cotton**, it seems to be the most environmentally friendly option. Provided, of course, that you do not rinse it with warm water. But fortunately most stains are best rinsed away with cold water and disappear completely when the sun shines on them. In terms of environmental impact, washable menstrual pads can be compared to washable nappies, even if you count the washing and production<sup>24</sup>.

If you want to menstruate without waste, you have a wide choice of washable menstrual pads, but they still often have to be bought online. Washable pads are made of cotton or fleece with a layer of plastic to prevent leakage, cotton being the better option. Washing a single fleece cardigan releases up to 1 million microfibres<sup>25</sup>. That may be a lot less with one piece of menstrual pad, but all microfibres that come loose in the washing machine end up in the sewage system. The substances are so small that they easily pass through the sewage system. This is how they end up in our rivers, lakes and oceans and hence in our food chain. Researchers have already found a large number of microplastics in fish and shellfish on markets.

Washable sanitary pads last between 5 to 10 years and can be washed at 40 degrees. Manufacturers of washable pads recommend rinsing the pads out with cold water immediately after use. Do not use hot water: not only does it take more energy, but it also causes the blood to clot, causing it to migrate into the fabric. To be the most environmentally friendly: let it wash for weeks after use at 40 degrees Celsius. Washable menstrual pads are not only better for the environment – they can also help combat period poverty by being comparatively cheaper. It is just as much of an investment.

Most washable sanitary napkins are made from environmentally friendly raw materials such as **hemp** (LanaLuna), **organic cotton** (ImseVimse, Ella's house) or **organic bamboo** (JustFussy), sometimes they contain PUL, a layer of laminated polyester against leakage (ImseVimse). Washable menstrual pads are for sale in numerous

22 <https://www.wecf.org/nl/plasticvrije-gezonde-menstruatie/>

23 <https://www.wecf.org/nl/wssp/>

24 <https://www.milieucentraal.nl/bewust-winkelen/mazzelkontjes/>

25 <https://www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/plastic-probleem/feiten-en-cijfers/plasticcijfers/>

webshops, including LanaLuna, Cotton & Ko, Green Jump, Cute Cotton and Kaatje Cotton. They cost between 5 and 12 euro each.

## MENSTRUAL UNDERWEAR AND OTHER ALTERNATIVES

### Menstrual underwear

Another emerging product category is menstrual underwear. This special underwear will keep you dry during your period, without making it impractical or unhygienic. Or as a manufacturer of menstrual underwear puts it: “Yes, you can wear ‘em all day, yes, they’re totally reusable, and yes, it’s super liberating. Boom”. The pants are thin and can absorb the amount of blood from two tampons. So you don’t have to be afraid of leaks. You can combine the underwear with a cup or with a menstrual sponge (see below). After use, briefly rinse the pants under the tap, throw them in the washing machine and let them dry overnight, after which they are ready for use again! One of the sustainable companies that designs menstrual underwear is THINX, which produces products with the OekoTex label<sup>26</sup> and fully in line with European regulations on harmful substances (REACH)<sup>27</sup>.

### Nanosilver

You don’t have to be afraid of smells either when using menstrual underwear. Many manufacturers talk about the antibacterial material that period underwear are made of. However, this is also a point of concern. Usually so-called nanosilver is used. The underwear contains silver in tiny particles. Silver has an antibacterial effect, so it kills bacteria that cause odours. Similar materials are also known to have different properties in the form of nanoparticles than in ‘normal’ sizes. Gold, for example, does not normally react with anything, but gold nanoparticles are particularly reactive. However, it is unclear whether there are any risks associated with the use of nano silver. This, too, is a substance whose potential health effects have not yet been properly researched<sup>28</sup>. WECF sent a letter to the House of Representatives on this subject back in 2011<sup>29</sup>. The only research published so far into the influence of nanosilver on female reproductive health came with worrying results. Nanoparticles easily break through the blood-brain barrier and placenta and can therefore cause all kinds of potentially harmful health effects. Further research is therefore desperately needed, according to researchers from the

26 <https://ipen.org/sites/default/files/documents/WECF%20Executive%20Summery%20Textile%20Report.pdf>

27 <https://www.shethinx.com/pages/thinx-product-safety-standards>

28 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/559d276fe4b0a65ec3938057/t/5b928c9821c67c3e62503e19/1536330909021/Environmenstrual+briefing+F.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3uugrSTtwvylU14yZC1JH14iu8p5o626nljP39qkfOMrGgXFNMGSMkRPA>

29 <http://www.wecf-webserver.eu/download/2011/November/BriefaanTweedeKamerledenovernanotechnologie31Oktober2011.pdf>

European Union for Observatory of Nanomaterials (EUON<sup>30</sup>). Traces of nanosilver are also found in the washing water of all garments that are washed. WECF therefore argues in favour of the precautionary principle, a ban on nanosilver in consumer products until it has been proven that the material is harmless to humans and the environment.

### Menstrual sponge

For the more experienced user there are also menstrual sponges, about which unfortunately not much is known yet. These sponges, made of natural materials, last about six months. It takes quite some practice to insert and remove them properly, but the sponges can remain in place for about 8 hours. Not much research has been done as yet, and as there might be a risk on TSS an organisation like Wen UK does not recommend using them.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Do you want to be nice to your body, your wallet and our planet? Then choose washable pads, menstrual cups, menstrual underwear or menstrual sponges. Without pesticide residues and plastics that create a sultry climate in your pants. It is an investment, but one that will pay for itself after a while. Washable menstrual products not only produce less waste than disposable products. As a woman\* you need about 12,000 disposable products in about forty fertile years, compared to 200 washable menstrual pads, if you assume that the washable products last five years and menstruation lasts an average of five days. You only need one menstrual cup, and it will last for years. Calculate what you have left each month.

Apart from the benefit for your wallet, it also benefits your health. It hasn't been researched, but many people who menstruate often experience less abdominal pain when using menstrual cups. And because menstrual blood is collected instead of absorbed, your mucous membranes don't dry out, which in turn can lead to fewer allergic reactions and irritation.

## #MENSTRUATIONTRANSITION

<sup>30</sup> A critical review of studies on the reproductive and developmental toxicity of nanomaterials

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL REGULATIONS

In the previous chapter we read about healthier, sustainable alternatives to conventional menstrual products. However, if it were up to us, the responsibility for poison-free, healthy menstrual products should really not rest with the consumer at all, but with the government. In addition, consumers should have the right to know what is in menstrual pads and tampons. The fact that there is no information leaflet for tampons or menstrual pads only seems to feed the unrest.

The lack of clear labelling on disposable products and a potential accumulation of exposure to harmful substances is a cause for concern as menstrual products are widely used. Although there are an increasing number of studies demonstrating the harmfulness of the substances used in tampons and menstrual pads, manufacturers are not legally obliged to disclose the ingredients in their products. Unlike food and cosmetics, manufacturers are not required to provide a package leaflet or list of ingredients. There is no European regulation.

### Just a few players worldwide

Billions are involved in the menstrual products industry. The industry responsible for tampons, menstrual pads, wet wipes, vaginal douches is in the hands of just a few players: Procter & Gamble, Kimberly-Clark and Johnson & Johnson. These



companies have succeeded in making consumers believe that disposable products are not only the most convenient and affordable option, but also do not pose any health or environmental risks. Product safety and sustainability seem to be of secondary importance.

And the market share of those few players is only increasing. According to an Allied Market

Research report entitled “World Feminine Hygiene Products Market–Opportunities and Forecasts, 2015–2022”, the global market for disposable menstrual products is expected to generate revenues of \$42.7 billion and grow by 6.1% over the period 2016–2022. In 2015, the Asia–Pacific region accounted for the world’s largest market share of around 48.9%<sup>31</sup>.

## WHERE IS THE REGULATION?

Not only do the large producers control a large part of the world market, they can also do as they please, because there is no national or European regulation requiring them to provide a package leaflet. Normally, European regulations are at the forefront. In this case, it is not.

In the European health industry, there are 3 main product categories, each of which has its own regulatory framework:

- Medicines, as is understandable, are the most strictly regulated.
- Medical devices, such as sterile wipes or bandages.
- Cosmetics and perfume

It seems so logical to place tampons, sanitary napkins and menstrual cups in the same category as medical devices, as happens in the US and Japan, because they are products that come into contact with the skin and with the vaginal mucosa. In Europe, however, menstrual products are regulated as a standard consumer product, such as a pen or a coffee cup. Menstrual pads and tampons must be ‘safe’ according to the guidelines of the European General Product Safety Directive. There is no further EU regulation.

For the time being, pad manufacturers are only obliged to state the risk of TSS and the degree of absorption on the packaging; this is indicated with drops. This is and remains a peculiar matter for products worn so close to the skin or even internally. The vagina is one of the most absorbent parts of the female body. Substances that penetrate the skin enter the bloodstream directly. And we are not talking about incidental exposure. Women menstruate some 30 to 40 years of their lives. Fortunately, things are beginning to change. One of the main conclusions of the aforementioned French ANSES report was that it is necessary to establish a regulatory framework at European level, a conclusion with which we wholeheartedly agree. Just last year, ANSES ordered manufacturers to eliminate or minimise carcinogenic and hormone-disrupting substances in menstrual pads or tampons.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/world-feminine-hygiene-products-market-is-expected-to-reach-427-billion-by-2022-575532151.html>

## WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN THE NETHERLANDS?

Unfortunately, the Netherlands has not yet reached that point. On the public website [www.waarzitwatin.nl](http://www.waarzitwatin.nl), an initiative of the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport, Infrastructure and Water and government Institute RIVM, it is stated that all Dutch sanitary products meet safety standards. Despite the fact that we do not know exactly what is in them, and despite the fact that residues of dioxins, pesticides and plasticisers have indeed been found, we do not need to worry, according to this website. We think we do.

The current legislation suggests that Dutch and European legislation provides the best possible protection for consumers. For the Netherlands, the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) mainly monitors whether producers and traders comply with the law. Menstrual pads and tampons sold in the Netherlands are found to be safe because the standard is looked at for each substance used. However, no account is taken of the **cocktail-effect**, the combination effects of harmful substances, mentioned earlier. For example, there are substances which do not have a harmful effect themselves, but which do combine with other substances.

Consumers must therefore be concerned about harmful substances in menstrual pads or tampons. Unfortunately, European legislation, too, is years behind the latest scientific insights and needs to be tightened up. After all, a great deal of research shows that products imported into our market contain harmful substances that are banned under European legislation. Transparency in this respect should also form part of the opinions on 'Waarzitwatin'<sup>32</sup>.

## REACH

REACH, the European chemicals legislation, gives companies and importers the important responsibility for assessing and managing the risks of substances they manufacture or place on the market. Producers and importers must record information on the properties and uses of chemicals and assess the potential risks of the substance. If, according to the European authorities, the risks of the substance are not manageable, a dangerous substance can be banned. In this way, Europe's ultimate aim is to replace the most dangerous substances with less dangerous ones and thus better protect human health and the environment. REACH is about chemicals used by industry and substances in everyday products such as cleaning products, paints, clothing, furniture and electrical appliances. It also covers menstrual products.

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32 <https://www.wecf.org/nl/overheidscampagne-waarzitwatin-schiet-tekort-in-bescherming-consument/>





## 'RIGHT TO KNOW'

Chemicals are everywhere in our daily lives. And they bring a lot of good too. But we also know more and more about the effects of dangerous chemicals. It is therefore logical that consumer demand for safer products is growing. As a consumer, you also have the right to ask the producer whether there are certain hazardous chemicals in products. This obligation to provide information will enable consumers to make conscious choices and will ensure that companies are also aware that consumers expect safe and healthy products. Article 33 of the REACH regulation gives consumers the right to ask companies whether products contain certain dangerous substances, the so-called 'substances of very high concern'. Examples are carcinogenic substances or substances that are mutagenic or toxic to reproduction. This list already consists of 168 substances, but it is not yet known whether or not thousands of substances are safe. The producer must provide the information free of charge within 45 days of receiving your request. You need to know the name of the substance of concern and how to use it safely. In addition, the obligation only applies to substances of very high concern present in concentrations exceeding 0.1% by weight. So there is still work to be done. Although this obligation to provide information also has a number of observations to make, it is an important tool for better protection for you as a consumer, but also for the environment.



Do you have a question about chemical substances in a certain product or packaging? Then write a letter to the supplier and inquire about any chemical substances in the product. You can find a sample letter and more information on our website<sup>33</sup>. If you do not receive an answer from the supplier, you can report this to the NVWA in the Netherlands, tel: 0900-03 88 or to the FPS Public Health in Belgium: [info@milieu.belgie.be](mailto:info@milieu.belgie.be)

**But the most important thing, of course, is that you as a consumer can make your own choice and simply view the list of ingredients via the leaflet. Compulsory labelling, now**

**#WHATISINMYTAMPON**

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.wecf.org/nl/the-right-to-know-voorbeeldbrief/>

## WECF AND WASH

In many countries, sustainable and safe menstruation is not possible at all. Clean water is not a matter of course for millions of people in rural Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Africa. Going to the toilet is often a precarious activity. School toilets, even in rural Eastern Europe, often consist only of a pit latrine, a hut with a few holes in the ground. Often also without a door. Some girls don't even dare to drink water, so as not to have to use the latrine. The latrines are often far away from school, so toilet breaks disrupt the lesson. It can also be dangerous for children and girls to go there on their own. In addition, the present water sources are often not well protected, because urine and faecal matter can contaminate the water sources via the pit latrines. As a result, the (drinking) water is often contaminated with bacteria, nitrates and pesticide residues. Having access to water, and certainly to safe water, is a human right.

## SAFE SCHOOL SANITATION PROGRAM

Because of the lack of decent toilets and clean water, many girls do not go to school when they have their period. Millions of girls miss a quarter of their schooling because of this, especially in winter when the snow is meters high in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In a study that we carried out together with our partner JHR in Northern Macedonia, 50-90% of the girls interviewed stated that they do not go to school when they have their period, due to a lack of menstrual pads and (clean) toilets<sup>34</sup>.

Period poverty deprives people worldwide of time and opportunities. It is precisely people living in poverty who benefit from good education. But without safe sanitation there is no education. That is why we have been investing in our Safe School Sanitation Programme for years<sup>35</sup>.

An important part of the project is addressing the lack of safe sanitation in schools. Together with our partners, we are therefore building stone toilet blocks, in or near schools, guaranteeing privacy and safety. The ecosan toilets are built according to the principle of UDDT, Urine Diverting Dry Toilets<sup>36</sup>. The urine and faeces are collected separately and stored in separate tanks. After a special process they can then be used as fertiliser and compost. Together with our partners in Uganda and Burkina Fasso, we go one step further and develop biogas in addition to compost. During the construction process, the local communities,

34 <http://jhrmk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HERE.pdf>

35 <https://www.natracare.com/blog/natracare-and-wecf/>

36 Safe water and sanitation for all film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bQhWZFAxc>

including the builders and teachers, are trained in the principles of ecosanitation. In addition to information about the use of the dry compost toilets, menstrual management and the importance of menstrual health for gender equality is also part of the project.

We support our partners in the construction of ecological school toilets, drinking water facilities and ecological wastewater treatment plants in rural areas without sewers. Within these projects, we work with schools and local authorities to raise awareness about protecting drinking water sources and providing menstrual health education. In our sustainable sanitation projects we train in how to

deal with the reuse of nutrients and wastewater, and how to produce small-scale biogas. Central to our projects in Macedonia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Albania and other countries is our WSSP programme, **Water & Safety Sanitation Plan**, a step-by-step training and awareness programme in which participants learn how to build toilets that are safe, how to take menstrual periods into account as a matter of course and how to ensure that drinking water sources do not become polluted.



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## NO EDUCATION WITHOUT WASH

For 250 euros, our partners are already building an indoor ecosan school toilet. Support our partners so that girls can go to school, even when they have their period: [www.wecf.org/donate](http://www.wecf.org/donate)

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIPS

### Would you like to read more about different topics related to your period?

- Period – menstrual magazine, <https://www.period.media/>
- City to Sea Campaign <https://www.citytosea.org.uk/campaign/plastic-free-periods/>
- Het Damesverband, <https://www.hetdamesverband.nl>
- [www.hevigbloedverlies.nl](http://www.hevigbloedverlies.nl)
- Environmenstrual Campaign by Wen UK <https://www.wen.org.uk/our-work/environmenstrual/>
- <https://www.wecf.org/nl/plasticvrije-gezonde-menstruatie/>
- <https://www.wecf.org/menstruationmatters>
- Zero Waste Europe [https://zerowasteeurope.eu/products/menstrual\\_products\\_nappies\\_wet\\_wipes/](https://zerowasteeurope.eu/products/menstrual_products_nappies_wet_wipes/)

### Looking for alternatives:

- The Keepcup
- Kaatje Katoen <https://www.kaatjekatoen.nl/voor-vrouwen/c352>
- [www.greenjump.nl](http://www.greenjump.nl)
- [www.cupkiezer.nl](http://www.cupkiezer.nl)
- Menstrual cup by Lunette: <https://uk.lunette.com/>
- Period Pants by Cheeky Wipes, <https://www.cheekywipes.com/city-to-sea-reusable-wipes-cloth-sanitary-pads-makeup-removers.html>
- Reusable tampon applicator by <https://wearedame.com>
- Organic and plastic free tampons and pads by Organic Mondays <https://organicmondays.com>
- [www.yoni.care](http://www.yoni.care)
- [www.natracare.com](http://www.natracare.com)

Have you become a period-action-enthusiast and do you want to become more active in this fight for equality? Then check out the hashtag #PeriodAction for more!



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**This is a publication from WECF, Women Engage for a Common Future,  
in collaboration with Partners for a Healthy Environment (PGL).**

WECF is a network of 150 women's and environmental organisations in 50 countries. WECF has been campaigning for a healthy environment for 25 years. Our goal is to strengthen female leadership and gender equality in the field of sustainability.

We do this by working on three key areas: sustainable development, climate and environmental action and a non-toxic society. Always from a feminist perspective.

With our activities aimed at capacity building, influencing policy and raising awareness, we strengthen the position of women worldwide.

[www.wecf.org/nl](http://www.wecf.org/nl)

PGL: Partners for a Healthy Environment is an organisation dedicated to tackling environmental factors that can affect people's health. These include factors such as particulate matter, pesticides and radiation. PGL achieve this through education, providing information and lobbying. PGL also aim to be a hotline where people can report their health complaints with regard to environmental factors. PGL have been active as an association for more than ten years; for the last few months it has been transformed into a working group in order to be able to react more adequately to new developments.

Email: [info@vusse.nl](mailto:info@vusse.nl).



#smashthetaboo #gezondemenstruatie #periodpoverty #menstruatiearmoede  
#menstrualequity #plasticfreeperiods\*