

# Reusable Feminine Protection: Alternatives to Pads and Tampons

by Karyn Johnson

*Commercial menstrual products are bad for the environment, bad for your wallet, and possibly dangerous for your health. There are several reusable alternatives that are healthier for you and your money in the long run, and friendlier to the environment. This article lists some of the products that are available, and the pros and cons of each.*

If you're a menstruating woman, you've probably purchased more boxes of tampons and maxi pads than you can even count. Think for one moment about how much you spend on all these countless products over so many years, not to mention how much space they take up in landfills once they're discarded. Is there an easier, more economically and environmentally friendly alternative? Yes! And more and more women are choosing to use these products to help save money and the environment. Sure, they take some getting used to, and the initial investment may seem like a lot, but in the long run, they will save you a lot of money, save a lot of space in landfills, and even protect your health.

## Reusable Maxi Pads

Many women are now choosing to use maxi pads that can simply be washed and reused. The advantages to using these pads, aside from the reduction of trash, is that they are usually more comfortable than disposable pads and you can use the water for soaking them to water your plants (the blood provides great nourishment). Also, reusable pads are non-toxic. Commercial pads and tampons can be bleached with chemicals that are harmful to your body, possibly causing such problems as cancer, Toxic Shock Syndrome, and headaches. The risk of getting these things from feminine hygiene products may be small, but reusable pads eliminate this risk altogether.

Because most reusable pads are made from unbleached cotton, they are also breathable, helping to prevent excess moisture, which can cause infections, irritation, and odors. Commercial products, on the other hand, can trap moisture and cause or exacerbate these types of problems. And if these products are also scented, that can encourage irritation and infection even more.

The disadvantage to reusable pads is that they can be somewhat messy. Some women keep a bucket of water handy for soaking the pads before they go into the wash (and, as I mentioned above, then use this to water their plants after the pads go into the wash). Some women just rinse their pads in the sink as they are done with them. They are compatible with washing machines and dryers, although using bleach and scented laundry products are not recommended.

Another disadvantage to using these pads is that they are not always convenient. When you are at work or traveling, for example, and need to use a public restroom, it's not exactly a great place to soak or rinse out a pad. One idea is to bring a plastic bag for the used pad and have a clean one available. Some brands of reusable pads offer carry cases that keep clean and used pads separated.

## Brand Names to Look For

If you don't want to sew your own pads, there are a variety of brands available on the Internet. Lunapads are advertised on many websites. They come in a variety of sizes, colors and patterns, and you usually need to buy the liners separately from the pads. They don't last forever, perhaps three

years or so, but in the long run, they are more cost effective than three years' worth of commercial maxi pads and tampons. Glad Rags is also another popular brand.

Imse Vimse is another brand that, while not as widely touted as Lunapads or Glad Rags, is considered comfortable and high quality. They do not come in the various colors and patterns that Lunapads do. Instead, they are unbleached cotton, which shows stains more easily. Wemoon is another brand that comes in a wide variety of colors and patterns, and even has a little storage purse (sold separately), that keep used and clean pads separate. Other brands include Mother of Eden Comfort Pads, and Happy Heiny's Menstrual Pads.

If you'd rather save a little money and you're handy with a thread and needle, type "sew reusable menstrual pads" into Google, and you'll get a few websites with instructions to make your own. There are even no-sew directions available for those less crafty folks.

## **Reusable "Tampons"**

The alternatives to tampons are usually silicone cups or natural sea sponges, although some women make their own tampons using cotton baby socks. The advantage to these products, like the pads, is that they are safer to use and more comfortable. Unlike sea sponges and cotton baby socks, the silicone cups last for several years with the proper care. All they normally require is a quick rinse with warm water and an unscented soap, and a dry-off with a lint free towel, before they are good to go again. These cups can also be worn for twice as long as tampons, if a woman has a light to medium menstrual flow. They can be worn for up to twelve hours before having to be removed and cleaned. Also, there is no messy string attached, so you can wear these products with anything and not worry about showing off any evidence of your period.

The disadvantage to these types of products, again, is that they need to be cleaned. Cups need to be removed very carefully, or they could spill before you're prepared, resulting in a rather messy situation. The best way to remove them is either over the toilet or in the shower. If you're in a public restroom, they might also prove inconvenient, but a quick cleaning with a wad of toilet paper or a flushable wet wipe is usually sufficient to clean them for re-insertion until you can get them thoroughly cleaned again. Sponges and baby socks, like the reusable pads, need to be thoroughly soaked and rinsed, which makes them extremely inconvenient in a public restroom.

Another problem you might encounter with the cup is that it could pinch at first, or be uncomfortable. Most cups come with a stem on the bottom, which you can trim off to make it more comfortable for insertion. If inserted properly, you won't even feel it. Thorough instructions for insertion come with the product.

## **Widely Available Brand Names**

Some of the most popular brands of cups are the Diva Cup, the Moon Cup (a UK brand), and the Keeper. These cups are all very similar. They collect blood, rather than absorbing it, and if inserted properly, they form a seal that prevents the blood from seeping out, keeping you dry and odor-free (although leaks can occur if the cup gets too full). The Keeper is made of rubber (not to be used if you're sensitive to latex), the Diva Cup out of silicone. Both have money-back guarantees – ninety days for the Keeper, one year for the Diva Cup – so you have plenty of time to decide if you like it and want to continue using it.

The cups come in two sizes: those for women who have given vaginal birth, and those for women who have not given birth or who have had c-sections. The cups are available for purchase either online or at some specialty stores.

Another alternative to tampons and cups is the sea sponge. Sea Pearls is a well-known brand. It is

even more environmentally friendly than the Keeper or Diva Cup, because as the sponges are harvested, they release millions of egg and sperm cells into the water, making sponges a renewable resource. Care needs to be taken when using the sea sponges, however, as they are not completely sterile. Women with sexually transmitted diseases or recurring infections should avoid using them. Sea sponges need to be removed and cleaned every three hours, which may be inconvenient, and will only last about six to eight cycles before having to be replaced.

Finally, for those wanting a homemade alternative, cotton baby socks are another option. They can be rolled and inserted like a tampon, and then simply rinsed, soaked, and washed when done. They will last a fairly long time with proper care.

Alternative menstrual products are a good way to help save the environment, prevent infection and disease, and save money in the long run. Because they are reusable, you don't need to worry about taking up space in landfills with discarded pads, tampons, and packaging. They do not contain harsh chemicals that some commercial products may contain, which decreases your risk of cancer and other diseases, irritation, odor, and infection. Most women find these products just as easy and comfortable to use as commercial products, once they get used to them.

The investment of these products may seem like a lot at first, but consider this: the average woman menstruates over a thirty-five year period. An average of twelve maxi pads are used per menstrual cycle, which equals an average of one hundred and forty-four used pads per year. About twenty-eight or so pads come in each package, which means you have to buy more than five boxes per year.

If you consider the individual cost of each of those packages, times the number you need per year for thirty-five years, the cost is staggering. And that's just for maxi pads. Tampons can be even more expensive, and many women use both maxi pads and tampons. In the long run, reusable menstrual products are just more cost-effective, and overall, they make more sense. As with any product, there are advantages and disadvantages, but in this case, the advantages of using reusable menstrual products far outweigh the disadvantages.