

# Toxic Tampons: Sanitary Protection?

By Joanne Furio

**M**ore than ten years after toxic shock syndrome (TSS) awakened women to the dangers of modern sanitary protection methods, women face another silent threat: chlorine-bleached paper products. Used in virtually every mass-marketed sanitary napkin and tampon on the market, chlorine-bleaching leaves small traces of dioxin—a toxic substance linked to cancer, birth defects, miscarriages, and immune system damage. Yet far more testing has been done on the possible health effects of chlorine-bleached coffee filters than on chlorine-bleached sanitary products.

Disposable pads and tampons contain wood fiber. Although pulp can be bleached without the use of chlorine, chlorine is used repeatedly to make pads "look" sanitary. In reality, sanitary products are *not* sterilized. The "whiter-than-white" product is a myth promoted by advertisers who equate white with sanitary.

After the TSS outbreak in 1980, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) required manufacturers to lower tampon absorbency from 20 to 15 grams. While this has proved effective (the Centers for Disease Control reports a 93 percent drop in cases of TSS), it does not address the other hazards of tampon use both to women and to the environment.

Fifty to 70 percent of U.S. women use tampons instead of sanitary napkins. Women insert a foreign, unsterilized,

highly absorbent object into their bodies, most likely containing dioxin, and consequently change the vaginal environment. One study, published in *Obstetrics & Gynecology* in February 1980, showed tampons may cause vaginal drying and ulcerations, since they absorb not only menstrual blood but also genital secretions. A study published five months later found that fibrous materials from tampons can be incorporated into vaginal membranes and may be connected to an increase in cervical cancer. With the threat of TSS seemingly obliterated, there have

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been few new U.S. studies on TSS or tampon-related illnesses. Manufacturers do not test their products and the FDA only requires that tampon absorbency and TSS symptoms be labeled on the package.

Environmentalists have long been concerned about the effects of chlorine-bleaching. Chlorine-based pollutants kill marine life, paper mills destroy trees, and deadly dioxin enters the food chain when products are flushed into the rivers. Then there are waste problems. In the U.S., 11.3 billion sanitary pads were landfilled or incinerated in 1990. Overpackaging adds to disposal problems and consumes valuable resources. Greenpeace has initiated a "chlorine-free in 1993" campaign for paper com-

## Earth-Friendly, Safer Alternatives

Women should look for a pad that is not too thick (so washing and drying are safe), that's comfortable, made with quality materials, and well tested to ensure no possibility of shifting or rotation.

### Reusables

- Do-it-yourself pads. Use 100 percent white cotton terry cloth or flannel and fold repeatedly. Safety-pin into a snug-fitting pair of cotton briefs. Machine wash separately between each use.
- Many Moons sells two versions of washable cotton

pads, available belted or winged, that Velcro or snap together. A set of eight flannel pads runs about \$28. Write to 14-130 Dallas Road, Dept. GM, Victoria, B.C. V8V 1A3, Canada, or call (604) 382-1588.

- Moon Pads sells a kit containing belted flannel cotton pads for about \$5. Write P.O. Box 166, Dept. GM, Boulder Creek, Calif. 95006.

- New Cycle sells washable 100 percent cotton flannel pads: \$6.95 for two small pads, \$8.95 for two mediums, and \$10.95 for two large pads. A sampler containing all sizes is available for \$13.95. Send checks payable to New Cycle to P.O.

Box 1775, Sebastopol, Calif. 95473, or call (800) 845-FLOW.

- Women's Choice sells fleece pads with nylon backing and Velcro "wings" for about \$5. Write P.O. Box 245, Gabriola, B.C. V0R 1X0, Canada, or call (604) 247-8433.

### Disposables

- Johnson & Johnson's Stay-free Ultra Plus (\$3.30 for 20) has a superabsorbent center made of spagnum moss covered by white paper. Because it is made of a natural material that is not bleached or dyed, the center of the pad is honey-colored.
- Seventh Generation's non-

chlorine-bleached pads are sold nationwide in health food stores and drugstores. Check your neighborhood vendors for supplies or call (800) 262-0042.

### Other Methods

- The Keeper: an FDA-approved bell-shaped soft rubber device that catches menstrual flow—a menstrual cup. Its forerunner was the Tassette. Reusable, it comes in its own carrying pouch and can last for years. Company President Lou Crawford notes that because "the keeper is earth friendly and wonderfully convenient," the company has more than tripled its sales since it began

panies and suggests that everyone reduce and reuse as much as possible. An alternative is oxygen-bleaching.

Inspired by the book *The Sanitary Protection Scandal*, published by the Women's Environmental Network, women in Great Britain forced manufacturers to switch to the less toxic oxygen-bleaching method. The women undertook a massive media campaign, enlisted the help of Parliament and Greenpeace, and urged a boycott of chlorine-bleached paper products, especially napkins, tampons, and baby diapers. After 50,000 letters to manufacturers and to Parliament, within six weeks all major British sanitary napkin companies agreed to switch to oxygen-bleached paper or chemically treated mechanical pulp—both of which are potentially less harmful to women and the environment.

Soon after, Canadian environmentalists mounted an anti-chlorine-bleaching campaign. In their new book, *Whitewash* (HarperCollins), Liz Armstrong and Adrienne Scott present an overview of the North American health and environmental issues surrounding sanitary protection. "Women are deeply concerned about the environment," write Armstrong and Scott, "and are prepared to protect it." As the lone consumers of sanitary products, only women have the power to demand change for methods friendlier to their bodies and to the earth. **ESB**

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in 1987 and is experiencing its greatest success in Europe.

The Keeper comes in two styles: A for after childbirth; B for before. Each is \$35 plus \$2 shipping and handling. Write to: The Keeper, Box 20023MS, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220. It has a three-month, money-back guarantee.

■ Sponges: though not FDA-approved (for fear women would wash them out in public sinks) sponges continue to be used by women. There's been some debate about the cleanliness of natural sea sponges; some women believe that Caribbean-culled sponges have fewer contaminants than Mediterranean ones. Prices range from \$1.99

to \$2.99 depending on size and origin.

■ Diaphragms: some women use this contraceptive to catch menstrual flow in the same way the menstrual cup is used. Diaphragms must be fitted and purchased through a nurse practitioner or gynecologist. Price: \$20 to \$25.

■ Menstrual Extraction: a legal but somewhat controversial method used to remove the contents of the uterus during menstruation. The procedure is performed by self-help groups and clinics. For information call the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, a national network of 20 women's clinics; (213) 957-4062. —J.F.

## Radiotherapy—Friend or Foe?

Last March, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a report studying the incidence of radiation-induced cancer; the subjects were women with breast cancer who received radiotherapy. According to the study, "Cancer in the Contralateral Breast After Radiotherapy for Breast Cancer," women with cancer in one breast have a threefold increased risk that cancer will develop in the second

breast. Though this may be due in part to contamination from radiotherapy delivered to the first breast—and that risk is said to be significantly higher for women under 45—the report still concluded that "radiotherapy for breast cancer contributes little to the already high risk of cancer in the second breast."

This report joins the growing list of confusing and often contradictory studies on the efficacy of radiation therapy in breast cancer treatment. The essential question that remains unanswered is whether these increased rates of induced cancer in women under 45 are merely an unfortunate possibility, requiring treatment sometime in the future, or a significant factor that may increase a woman's chance of dying. In other words, would the woman under 45 be better off (less at risk) with no radiation treatment?

Many experts believe radiotherapy is an insignificant risk because new cancer is likely to be detected early, as a result of the meticulous follow-up care most breast cancer patients receive. However, other scientists contend

that breast cancer is usually a slow-growing disease that can take ten to 15 years to develop into a life-threatening condition. Short-term markers of three-, five-, or even ten-year remissions often, but do not necessarily, indicate 20 or 30 years of survival. Moreover, side effects of radiotherapy can take years to be manifested. Still, data is unavailable to support either claim and this

### Our Bodies, Ourselves

discrepancy illustrates the complications of evaluating breast cancer therapies.

Lifetime risk of contralateral breast cancer is contingent upon age and the amount of radiation prescribed. In one study, women who had radical mastectomies and radiation did as well as those who had no radiation—for the first ten years. Thereafter, they fared not as well. Radiation-induced fibrosis of organs such as the lymph nodes, heart, and lungs contributed to the women dying of cardiac disease at a higher rate.

Radiation oncology centers now ensure that vital organs receive the least amount of radiation possible. Unfortunately, most radiation to the opposite breast comes from internal scatter and cannot be prevented by external shielding.

If you are having radiation therapy, question your radiologist about precautions taken to minimize the scatter. Because advances in treatment have been slow, much of breast cancer therapy is educated guesswork.

—The Boston Women's Health Book Collective