Can tampons cause cancer? [1]

Dear Alice,

I recently saw a flyer in one of the public restrooms at my college claiming that tampons contained harmful synthetic fibers that can cause cancer. Is this true?

Answer

Dear Reader,

No, this is another urban legend that’s been contributing to the rumor mill on the Internet, college campuses, and elsewhere for too long. Despite what the flyer claims, tampons made and sold in the United States do not contain harmful synthetic fibers that can cause cancer. Standards and regulations set and enforced by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ensure the safety and effectiveness of various consumer products, including tampons. This agency inspects the design, materials, and manufacturing process of tampons, strictly regulating their manufacture and sale.

The misinformation that has been circulating regarding tampons primarily concerns the following issues:

**Asbestos**

Asbestos, a carcinogen, has been falsely rumored as an additive to tampons under the pretense that it increases menstrual flow and therefore would promote retail sales. According to the FDA, no U.S. tampon has contained asbestos as an ingredient or as something involved in their manufacture.

**Bleaching of tampon components**

Rayon, an ingredient in some tampons, is a substance derived from the cellulose in wood pulp. Contrary to the popular belief that bleach is used to whiten or clean tampons, in fact the process of "bleaching" or purifying the fibers using chemicals such as chlorine dioxide or hydrogen peroxide is necessary to extract the absorbent rayon fibers from the wood pulp.

**Dioxin**

Since low levels of dioxin may have been present in tampons in the past, the fear that this cancer-causing chemical is still a part of tampons has remained. Tampon manufacturers have discontinued the particular rayon bleaching procedure that could have caused this side effect. Plus, the FDA currently asks rayon tampon manufacturers to test for dioxin. These tests,
performed in independent laboratories, have shown dioxin amounts to be at or below the detectable level, and the risk of health problems from this exposure is considered negligible.

**Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) risk**

Increased risk of Toxic Shock Syndrome from the use of certain tampon styles and some high absorbency tampon materials led to these products’ removal from the U.S. market in 1980. As a result of the FDA intervention and education efforts, the incidence of TSS drastically decreased. Tampons produced in the U.S. are made from cotton, rayon, or a blend of the two materials. Despite continuing concern that rayon fibers in particular put one at risk for TSS, no difference in reported problems has been noted in women using cotton versus rayon tampons.

So, it seems that if *Attack of the Toxic Tampons* comes to your campus, it's more likely to be a fantasy movie than a documentary film. For more details, you can visit the FDA web page on [tampon safety](https://www.fda.gov) [2].

Alice!

Category:

- General Health [3]
- Body Maintenance [4]
- Cancer [5]
- Environmental Health [6]

**Related questions**

- Tampons or pads? [8]
- The ins and outs of menstrual cups? How do they differ from tampons and pads? [9]
- Does a shampoo additive (sodium lauryl sulfate) cause cancer? [10]
- Lost tampon [12]

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