Dear Alice,

My mother recommended that I use a cotton washable sanitary towel during my period (as she did) instead of disposable pads. In the country I'm from the feminine sanitary towel is 30x30cm, so when I put it in my panties I can't wear trousers, tights, or jeans. What is your opinion? Are disposable pads unhygienic?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's great that you are open to your mother's recommendations while inquiring for yourself whether they will work for you. Women today have many choices of how to catch their menstrual blood. There are disposable pads, reusable pads, slender pads, super pads, pads with wings, tampons with and without applicators, and rubber and plastic menstrual cups. Each menstrual modality can be more or less helpful at different times in your life and for different activities.

Reusable pads and disposable pads are equally hygienic when used correctly, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Some benefits of using disposable pads is that they are easier to find in stores and might be offered in a greater variety of shapes, sizes, absorbency levels, and brands. Also, with disposables, there is no need to wash or store them, so they might be an easier option, especially when traveling. Some disposable pads (and tampons) contain harmful chemicals that can be absorbed through the skin in the genital area. If you're concerned about such chemicals, or about the environmental impact of using disposables, you can buy disposable pads made with organic cotton and without chemical additives in most health food stores.

Now onto the pros of your mother's suggestion. In addition to environmental benefits like not filling the landfill with disposable pads, another advantage of reusable pads is that over time they are very cost effective. Most women reuse their pads for at least five years, which means five years of not having to buy disposables each month. Another reason some women might prefer reusable pads is that they feel they are more comfortable. The pads? often made of cotton or flannel? are soft, absorbent, breathable, and conform to the body. They don't have the plastic backing which can chafe and irritate skin and bunch in uncomfortable ways. While not as easy to pick up at the corner drug store, most health food stores carry reusable pads, and certainly an online search will turn up many results. Some women may be intimidated by
the task of washing their reusable pads, but the process is quite simple. After a quick rinse, they can be tossed in with the regular laundry (dark load is probably safest) and dried in the dryer. Or you can hand wash them. If you're going to be out all day you can bring a plastic or cloth bag to keep the used pads in and wash them when you get home.

With almost any menstrual product there is some risk of getting toxic shock syndrome (TSS), a condition in which normally harmless bacteria on the skin makes its way into the bloodstream and releases toxins. Both reusable and disposable pads carry a low risk of TSS because blood leaves the vaginal canal immediately, rather than collecting in a tampon that may sit in the vagina for hours. No matter what kind of pad you choose, it's best to change pads every two to five hours as needed, to prevent bacteria and odor buildup.

Whichever type of pad or tampon or menstrual cup you choose for the majority of the time, remember you can always switch things up if activities like traveling, swimming, or wearing a super tight pair of pants require a different type of protection. Comfort, convenience, thrift, and effectiveness all come into play when choosing between the different types of menstrual products, but rest assured that when you use them right, both disposable and reusable pads are completely hygienic and safe.

Alice!
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