

Lifeline from sharks - 6

You take a RM1,000 5-month loan and default in the last repayment of RM320. By the end of the fourth year you owe an astonishing RM11,343.

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Disposable diapers, sanitary pads & tampons

CLOSE-CONTACT TOXINS

THEY are white, "pure", "clean" — and deadly. Disposable diapers (for both babies and adults), sanitary pads and tampons may be slowly leaching cancer-causing agents and other toxic chemicals into our bodies.

Learn how to protect yourself with this guide.

— See pages 2-5

Respiratory distress

Testicular cancer

Rashes

Male infertility

Suffocation & asphyxiation

Asthma

Disposable baby diaper

Endometriosis

Reduce fertility

Suppress immune system

Disposable sanitary pads and panty liner

Tampon

Toxic Shock Syndrome

Safer reusable cotton alternatives

Organic cotton baby diapers

Cotton sanitary pad

Organic cotton sanitary pad

SANITARY PADS

A silent health threat

DID you know that most sanitary pads (and tampons) are made or bleached with chlorine compounds that contain traces of the organochlorine — and known carcinogen — dioxin.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has named dioxin the most potent carcinogen known to science.

A 1996 EPA study linked dioxin exposure with increased risks for endometriosis (an infection of the uterine lining).

The EPA has also concluded that people with high exposure to dioxins may be at risk for other effects that could suppress the immune system, increase the risk of pelvic inflammatory disease, reduce fertility, and possibly interfere with normal fetal and childhood development.

In overseas tests, sanitary pads have been found to contain 400 parts per trillion (ppt) dioxin.

Although the paper industry has maintained that such levels are too low to cause any health problems, studies have shown that dioxin appears to migrate easily out of paper

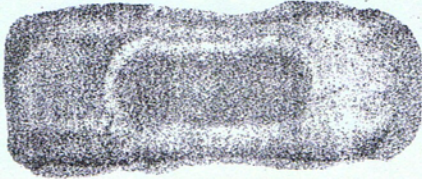
products.

Fish and other wildlife have died after exposure to the incredibly small dose of 38 parts per quadrillion dioxin.

The average woman uses approximately 15,000 pads over the course of her lifetime. The effect of continual exposure to dioxin, which is forever stored in fat cells, may become cumulative and deadly.

MANUFACTURED WITH LOTS OF CHEMICALS

To make a sanitary pad, wood pulp fibres are first dispersed in water in a large tub. Most of the chemicals and dyes required are added at this stage. (The pulp is then scraped and brushed and inserted with air to make it fleecy.)



Some pads contain added rayon, which also originates from wood, for extra absorbency. The cellulose in the wood is dissolved in a caustic solution, and squirted into fine jets in an acid bath. (The mixture then solidifies and dries into longer fibres.)

Chemical processes include de-inking recycled material, washing with detergents and bleaching. (As a result, some traces of chemicals used remain in the pad.)

Additives are also used to enhance the properties of the pad. These include absorbency agents and wet-strength agents — often, polysorbate and urea formaldehyde.

Further bleaching, involving chlorine, may take place to achieve that glowing white look.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE

That's the part you can't see. But even the external parts on a sanitary pad

that you can see are all not natural.

The plastic bottom — to prevent leakage — will usually be made of polythene.

The non-woven fabric covering on the pad is a lightweight material which is often polypropylene or rayon.

The back has 1 or 2 strips of pressure-sensitive adhesive covered with a strip of siliconised compound paper.

(The pads are then packaged in plastic bags or shrinkwrapped. And the packet itself may be printed with patterns — again, a chemical process.)

FULL OF BACTERIA

Sanitary pads can also harbour bacteria if they are not sterilised products.

In 1987, CAP's tests of some popular brands sold

here found unacceptably high bacteria counts of up to 11,000 (over 10 times the international safety standard). This could lead to vaginal infections in women using the pads.

Sanitary products, like pads, can also be placed on the market without prior evidence of safety or efficacy, even in developed countries.

In Canada for example, tongue depressors, bandages and dental floss are all considered medical devices, but not women's menstrual pads! Women are an all too easy target because they are bound by biology to menstruate for at least 35 years. Women are thus a captive market — and potentially easy victims of numerous types of sanitary pad (and tampon) trauma.

It is thus important that women know the facts so that they can seek safer alternatives — like using cloth, which is not only safer, but can also be reused many times.

(In fact, women have safely relied on home-made menstrual products, using any available absorbent material, for most of history.)

Make your own sanitary pad

SOME may think that this is primitive, but cotton cloth pads are making a comeback in the US, Britain and Canada. Cloth menstrual pads are also available in Singapore. Commercially-made reusable cotton pads are now sold there.

You can make wonderfully reusable and safe menstrual pads by using soft all-cotton flannel of worn-out nightgowns. Simply cut a 8x12-inch rectangle from the material, fold several times until you have an oblong pad, and place it in a pair of snug panties.

If you have a sewing machine, here's how you can make a more refined version. For each pad, cut out:

- one 8x5 inch flannel rectangle
 - one 5x5 inch flannel square
 - one 5x5 inch all-cotton terry cloth square (an old towel or washcloth works fine for this piece — but not too thick. This is the layer that will wick fluid away from your skin.)
 - Then create a cloth "sandwich" in this order: the 8x5 inch flannel, topped in the centre with the 5x5 inch terry cloth square, and then the 5x5 inch flannel square.
 - Use a zig-zag stitch to secure the layers of the "sandwich" together, and then zig-zag all around the edges of the pad to prevent fraying.
 - To use, just fold into a comfortable pad to fit your panties.
- (Note: For light days, you can create pads with just 2 or 3 flannel layers and no terry

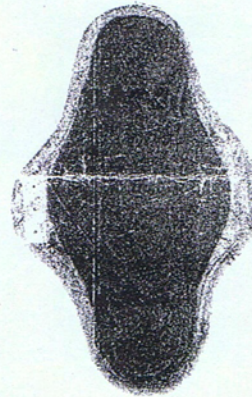
cloth. Also, home-made cloth pads have to be immediately changed once wet to prevent staining your clothes. So always make enough pads, or ensure enough are handy, to last for the duration of your period.)

USEFUL TIPS

• **Washing:** Rinse and soak the used pad before washing. To prevent odour, add a little baking soda to the water. To wash the cloths, warm water and soap work just fine.

For the occasional stubborn stain, soak the cloth in some ordinary salt solution before washing.

• **Travelling:** You can use a pouch to carry clean pads with you and use a used zip-lock bag for transporting used cloths until you get home.



A reusable cotton pad, sold commercially in the US.

Old-fashioned ways are safer

IN today's modern world where chemicals are increasingly being used in the manufacture and processing of goods, virtually every product we buy will have some adverse effect on our health and safety, or negative impact on our environment.

The challenge to us, as concerned consumers, is to seek out and use less harmful alternatives whenever possible. Making informed choices — ie by including health, safety and environmental considerations in our purchasing decisions — is essential.

Many of us were taught without realising it (by advertisements, for example) that our bodies and their products are unclean and shameful. Hence we use disposable diapers for our baby's poop or an incontinent adult's urine, disposable sanitary pads for menstrual blood, disposable paper tissue for a runny nose, etc.

We need to change our perception that throw-away is better, that modern equivalents to basic products are more convenient, and that age-old practices are primitive and out of place in today's world.

Our mothers and great grandmothers used to use recycled old serging to wrap their babies' bottoms, home-made cloths for that time of the month, and the good old handkerchief for wiping the face, mouth and hands.

In the light of all the dangers associated with white products, why not consider returning to basics? By taking care of ourselves in a more natural way, we start to get more in touch with our bodies and our natural cycles and functions.

More importantly, we are protecting ourselves from the many unnecessary health hazards equated with modern personal hygiene products. The future generation, to whom we are role models, can also benefit from the choices we make today.

DON'T BE BLINDED BY THE WHITEWASH

MOST mass-merchandised diapers, pads, even panty liners, and tampons use pulp and paper that has gone through the intensive bleaching process using chlorine gas to make them "whiter than white".

(The same goes for all the other white products: toilet rolls, facial tissues, kitchen paper, etc.)

Although the pulp used can be bleached without the use of chlorine, chlorine is needed (in fact, used repeatedly) because it makes diapers, pads and tampons "look" sanitary.

The dangerous "whiter-than-white" product is a myth promoted by advertisers who equate white with sanitary. Ignorant consumers buy into such sales pitches (at a risk to their health and safety), and as long as we do that, manufacturers of these items continue to create a demand for their products.

Disposable diapers, for example, command a US\$20 billion (about RM76 billion) global mar-

ket annually.

In North America alone, "disposable" diapers account for a whopping 85% of the market, amounting to US \$4 billion (about RM15.2 billion) per year in sales.

Disposable diapers, sanitary pads, adult incontinence products (and disposable medical garments) collectively represent a US\$300 million (about RM1,140 million) worldwide market for adhesives.

An unregulated industry

The diaper and menstrual product industry is a largely unregulated industry. This is especially so for the women's hygiene industry.

In spite of the clear links between tampons and the threat to women's lives for instance, the menstrual product industry is shrouded in secrecy — it is not legally compelled to list the con-

tents of tampons (or sanitary pads).

Not only that. Most of the widely disseminated research on tampons and sanitary hygiene products are funded by manufacturers so consumers hardly get to know the truth — or are confused about the truth.

Recent studies, for example, have produced conflicting information about the link between dioxin exposure and increased risks for endometriosis.

In fact, far more testing has been done on the possible health effects of chlorine-bleached coffee filters than on chlorine-bleached sanitary products.

It is thus not surprising that women remain largely ignorant of the chemicals they are putting into their bodies.

In November 1997, US Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney proposed a Bill aimed at directing the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to conduct research to determine the

extent to which the presence of dioxin, synthetic fibres, and other additives in tampons and related menstruation products pose health risks to women.

"An NIH study would mean that American women could depend on independent research, and not on the word of researchers funded by tampon manufacturers," She was quoted as saying.

As a result, in March 1999, "The Tampon Safety and Research Act of 1999" came into being in the US.

During the tabling of the Act at the US Congress, the following was revealed:

• The FDA has historically relied on data provided by manufacturers of feminine hygiene products in determining product safety.

• Although the FDA requires tampon manufacturers to monitor dioxin levels in their finished products, the information is not readily available to the public.