

ADVERTISING ARCHIVE

Monthly orbit: a 1960s' magazine advert for Tampax and, below, the Mooncup

One small step for women

Serena Mackesy landed on an alternative to tampons and is now a happy devotee

Eighteen months ago, I was in a supermarket loo. The usual hell-hole of overflowing sanitary bins. Looking up, I saw a sticker on the back of the door. "You can stop using tampons!" It said. "Mooncup reusable menstrual cup. Safer. Greener. Cheaper". It had a website and telephone number. I checked it out and came away £18 lighter in the wallet. The stickers come with the cup when you buy one. And there can be fewer higher recommendations than a satisfied user guerrilla-sticking your ads.

If you can cope only with references to "wings" and being able to ride/swim/dance at that time of the month, stop reading here. Because menstruation is a messy subject. And the usual methods for dealing with periods have significant drawbacks.

Tampons and towels leak, no matter what the advertisements say. The sticky strip on the underside of sanitary towels is either too sticky or not sticky enough, and you're perpetually aware that you are wearing them. Tampons have been known to cause toxic shock syndrome, a rare and occasionally deadly *Staphylococcus aureus* infection. There are only 40 cases a year in the UK, two to three of which are fatal, but half of those are associated with tampon use, which gives pause for thought.

In addition, unless you hunt down organic tampons, you are putting chlorine-bleached, deodorised (Tampax advertises one of its products on the strength of its deodorant content) rayon inside your body. As tampons soak up moisture, they dry out your vagina's natural self-cleaning mechanisms, leaving it prone to thrush and vaginosis, a smelly bacterial infection. Vaginosis is treated with antibiotics (which can also result in thrush) and if left untreated can lead to infection during and after childbirth.

Then there's the discomfort. In the first couple of days of a period you can be changing the tampons every couple of hours; by the latter days, insertion and removal can feel like rubbing yourself with sandpaper.

Furthermore there's the environmental impact. The average woman uses nearly 17,000 disposable pads and tampons in a lifetime. An estimated eight billion of these end up in Britain's sewage system, causing 70 per cent of blockages in the system. And once fished out, what's not incinerated becomes landfill. Or ends up on our beaches. Nice.

And then, there is the Mooncup. Menstrual cups, made of latex, have been around since the 1930s, but this one, made of the same medi-

cal-grade nonallergic silicone used in, among other things, replacement heart valves, initially hit the market four years ago. It is not dissimilar to a diaphragm. Roughly 5cm (2in) long, it forms a light seal with your vaginal walls and can hold up to 30ml of fluid at a time, roughly a third of the entire average menstrual flow and three times the quantity that a tampon can hold.

And it's reusable. A Mooncup lasts for years, just like a heart valve. As long as your hands are clean, you just empty it, flush it out (or wipe it round if you haven't any water handy) and reinsert it as often as you would a tampon. And give it the odd boiling, in the manner of sterilising baby bottles. That's it. Yes, I know. Most people's initial reaction is "Yuk!"

But think about it. A body is only a body and though we've become squeamish about menstruation, not helped by the you-need-an-applicator school of tampon marketing, menstruation is not going to go away. There's a certain skill involved in getting something as pliable and bouncy as a Mooncup to fold neatly into four and to go up inside you without it shooting across the room. But in my case it took only three goes, and if you remember the grim horror of the first onset of your periods, three goes is nothing.

Much has been written on women's chatroom pages on the internet extolling the virtues of the Mooncup and, if you trawl hard enough, there



Why be earthbound?



Why let anything tie you down? Millions of girls use Tampax tampons and cast monthly cares away. Tampax tampons, worn internally, are the modern sanitary protection. You feel carefree, comfortable, confident. Even confident enough for space walking!

You get total freedom with
TAMPAX
tampons

TAMPAX TAMPONS ARE MADE ONLY OF
TAMPAX LINTED IN BELMONT, MASS.

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A MOONCUP LASTS FOR YEARS, LIKE A HEART VALVE



is the odd negative story to be found, such as the odd complaint of leakage. However, this is simple to sort out: the cup has a stem at the bottom that needs to be trimmed with scissors to fit the individual user. One user — who admits that she has an unusually narrow, long, vaginal canal — found that her Mooncup formed such a tight seal that she ended up in casualty getting it removed the first time she used it. But even she recommends it. I can't think of another product that seems to have inspired such affectionate enthusiasm in its users.

I have become a proselytiser since I got my own. As well as its being a healthy option — associate specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist at Dumfries Royal Infirmary, Heather Currie, says it is a good thing — the practical advantages of using a Mooncup are manifold. No leakages. None of those panic moments when you realise that your tampon needs changing and you have to find a loo, right now. And not only does your handbag become a tampon-free zone but you can also go travelling for months at a time without carting supplies around (and if you've ever looked for tampons in a third-world country, you'll know what I mean).

And you save money. For example, if you use just one box of 30 Tampax tampons a month at £4.50, that's £54 a year, as against £18 for several years' use — and there's no environmental pollution. I wish that someone had told me about the Mooncup years ago. I wouldn't say that periods have suddenly become a pleasure, but they're no longer the pain they once were.

Better by the month

Other alternatives to generic towels and tampons are:

The Diva Cup — another version of menstrual cupping, £19.99, from www.salveo.co.uk, 020-8960 9702.

Washable cloth pads — Wemoon (www.wemoon.com.au) has three types and many colour/print ranges, including organic cotton flanellette, plus a range of storage bags. The pads (plus washable nappies, another great landfill saver) can be bought, from £4.75, at www.pushpants.com, 01865 408040.

Menstrual sponges — natural sea-sponges on a string. Rinse them out, boil them, dry them off and re-use them for six months. The company claims that the bleach and dioxin-free sponges do not cause the internal abrasions associated with generic tampons, via which *Staphylococcus aureus*, the toxic shock syndrome bacteria, enters the bloodstream. A pack of two is £9.99 from alternative health shops, or www.seapearls.co.uk

Organic cotton tampons — Natracare is a range of bleach-free, GMS-free, cotton, disposable pads and tampons. Available from Boots and health stores, £2.35 for 20 from www.spiritofnature.co.uk, 0870 7259885; or www.yourhealthfoodstore.co.uk