



UN Environment Assembly: Towards a Pollution-Free Planet Nairobi, Kenya, 2017

Pollution Free Periods - addressing pollution and health risks from unsustainable menstrual hygiene materials at UNEA-3

Women Major Group proposition

¹Dioxins in Menstrual Hygiene materials: According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), tampons and sanitary pads made of rayon or bleached cotton contain low levels of dioxins, one of the worst toxics and banned as a Persistent Organic Pollutant under the Stockholm Convention. The USFDA allays concern about chemicals in these products by asserting that levels at parts per trillion are so low that risk is minimal. EPA tests, however, assert that dioxin levels once thought acceptably low, adversely affect the reproductive and immune systems. An average menstruator uses 4000-5000 sanitary napkins in their lifetime.

Health: Tampon safety legislation, introduced in Congress in January 2003 (H.R. 373, Carolyn B. Maloney, 14th District, New York) requested the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to research health risks to women—including endometriosis and cancers of the breast, ovaries, and cervix—from the presence of dioxin, synthetic fibers, and other additives in feminine products (but the research was never done). Until research addresses the risks, the precautionary principle should be applied, as we are dealing with a highly hazardous toxin. Therefore health experts recommend to use unbleached, organic cotton sanitary pads and tampons (without plastic applicators).

Lifelong Exposure: The vagina contains some of the most sensitive and absorbent tissue in the body and has a dense concentration of blood vessels that can enable transfer of chemicals into the circulatory system, properties that advocates say bolster the need for higher safety precautions and disclosure requirements for menstrual care products. It is now

¹ All references here:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B0UoZ0GCWng4cVBjUHliTHRvTEk>
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RM1p3lWzUekRy5wGTbZcGvjJr0sq51ucX_fKZ1tukvU/edit?usp=sharing

established that due to women's unique physiology, they may respond differently than men to environmental toxin exposure. Many of these toxins are stored in fat and may reside in the body for long periods of time.

Other chemicals: Advocates are also concerned about pesticide residues that can be found in non-organic cotton in pads or tampons, as well as adhesive chemicals used in pads or other additives used to improve absorbency. Other unknown chemicals come from products that contain fragrances, which can be composed of a large range of chemical combinations that are not required to be disclosed. The FDA [recommends](#) that tampons be free from dioxins and pesticide or herbicide residue and requests that companies provide assurances, including test plans, for monitoring them. Currently campaigns are running in India, US and South Korea for disclosure.

Environment: According to a recent UK study, disposable menstrual products create over 200,000 tonnes of waste per year. An average woman will throw away 125-150 kg of menstrual products in her lifetime. Considering the fact that a disposable pad takes up to [800](#) years to break down, this is an alarming prospect.

Chlorine bleach is a key ingredient used to whiten the pulp for aesthetic reasons. Chlorine bleach is both an environmental and health hazard, releasing toxic chemicals as a by-product of the bleaching process when burnt.

Dioxin, also called an 'environmental hormone', is an endocrine disruptor, that is, it interferes with the normal functioning of the endocrine system—cells and glands in the body that secrete hormones, the chemical messengers that regulate bodily processes. Experimental evidence shows that elevated levels of the female hormone estrogen can promote breast cell proliferation which can lead to [breast cancer](#). Environmental estrogens or 'xenoestrogens' like dioxin may increase breast cancer risk by binding to and acting through estrogen receptors, thereby imitating natural estrogens.

Human rights violation: Health Hazards to Sanitation and Sewerage Workers - Handling soiled sanitary napkins exposes waste pickers to disease-causing microorganisms E coli, Salmonella, Staphylococcus, and pathogens that cause hepatitis and HIV. Waste pickers (mostly from marginalized and low income communities) are vulnerable to such infections as they are exposed to viruses thriving in soiled sanitary napkins that are not disposed of properly.

Case for Extended Producer Responsibility: Country laws like in India direct corporations to bear the costs for scientific handling of these wastes. Despite petitions from activists and CSOs these MNCs refuse to do proper health information disclosure or comply to EPR.

Absorbent Hygiene Products (AHPs) are a problematic waste stream in municipal solid waste management. With Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) still in its early stages for regulating corporations into taking responsibility for cradle-to-grave processing of AHPs along with the local self-governments.

Worldwide, there are 4 major corporations that produce some 80% of all menstrual / absorbent hygiene materials: Procter & Gamble, Kimberly Clark, Johnson & Johnson and Unilever. They can and should be called to commit to Extended Producer Responsibility and to phase out plastics, pesticide residues and other chemicals from their products.

Key points for UNEA 3

Resolution on environment and health

Governments to measure, report and eliminate possible presence of dioxin and pesticide in menstrual hygiene products.

Resolution on marine litter and/or soil

Extended Producer Responsibility to include Absorbent Hygiene Products in take-back schemes and material substitution (eliminate use of plastics and chemicals in the make) to organically grown and toxic-free cotton.

#MenstruationMatters #ToxicsinyourVagina #DetoxtheBox #TamponTruth
#DioxinfreeTampons #PeriodofChange #GreentheRed #RevaluingMenstruation

Recommendations

Stop false solutions - No incinerators for disposal of absorbent hygiene products.

Pollution free periods - phase out and ban the production and import of menstrual products with plastics and chemicals.

No use and throw - Create markets for healthier and more environmentally friendly products like organic cotton pads, cloth pads and menstrual cups.

Business compliance and full disclosure - Absorbent hygiene products must be brought under Extended Producer Responsibility to aid governments in remedying the landfill and sewerage issues from sanitary waste. Menstrual hygiene products must have full product information disclosure keeping in mind sexual and reproductive health rights.

Stop commodifying periods - more health research to understand safe options for menstrual hygiene and care.