

[HOW TO]

Have a zero-waste period



The average woman uses a mind-boggling 11,000 pads and tampons throughout her life. As a result, approximately 20 billion disposable menstrual products—most of which contain plastic that won't biodegrade for hundreds of years—are dumped into landfills annually. If the idea of your period products outliving you makes you want to reconsider the way you manage your monthly flow, we have good news.

BY KATE DALEY, FLANNERY DEAN, REBECCA GAO AND ALEX WARD

Everything you need to know about cups

For starters, a recent review of studies found that cups are as safe and effective as pads and tampons, as well as less expensive

What is a menstrual cup, and how the heck do I get it in there? “The bell-shaped cup is folded and inserted into the vaginal canal to collect menstrual blood,” says Yolanda Kirkham, an ob-gyn at Women’s College Hospital and St. Joseph’s Health Centre in Toronto. “It can be changed less often than pads or tampons and can be reused during each cycle and over many years.” While today’s versions are typically made of medical-grade silicone, the very first menstrual cup—invented by American actor Leona Chalmers in 1937—was latex rubber.

How do I know which size to use? “Every vagina and cervix is different,” says Kirkham. “But in general, try a smaller size if you’re under the age of 30, have never had a baby, have a low cervix or are just intimidated. If your flow is heavy, you’re taller or heavy-set, and have frequent leakage issues, you may want to consider a bigger size or a different brand.”

Any advice for my first time? Tampon users tend to have an easier time transitioning to cups, says Kirkham, who suggests doing a

dry run using non-silicone lubricant on a day that you’re not bleeding. Once inserted, the cup will create a seal with the vaginal wall; to remove it, pinch the cup to break the seal. While most cups come with a stem, this is used to guide your hand to the cup—not for removal.

Will I feel it? Once it’s inserted, a cup shouldn’t be uncomfortable or get in the way of your daily activities, but that doesn’t mean it’s imperceptible. “Some users feel bladder pressure, while others may feel like they have a slower stream or they cannot urinate completely while the cup is in,” says Kirkham. “Choosing a softer cup or one without a ridge may help; removing the cup to urinate is also an option.” Many manufacturers also recommend trimming the stem of the cup to reduce irritation to the labia, however, make sure to read the instructions carefully to ensure you don’t damage the cup while doing so.

How long can I leave it in for? Up to 12 hours, although those with heavier flows may need to empty and wash theirs more frequently. Consider removing it in the shower at first in order to avoid a bloody mess.

Do I need to worry about toxic shock syndrome (TSS)? This potentially fatal condition is caused by the release of toxins produced from an overgrowth of staphylococcus aureus bacteria. Menstrual cups, like tampons, pose a small risk of TSS if they are worn too long or not properly cleaned.

Are cups a good option for improving access to menstrual products? “I’m a big fan of using reusable products whenever possible,” says Nicole White, founder of the Saskatoon-based organization Moon Time

Sisters, which provides feminine hygiene products to more than 25 remote northern communities in Saskatchewan. However, she notes, there are some barriers—including, most obviously, access to the clean water that’s needed to wash out a cup. “We just want to provide the full spectrum of options for young women, so they can choose what works best for them,” she says. You can help by donating eco-friendly products to the organization or by designating your online donation to be used to purchase reusable menstrual products, says White. “Zero waste is an end goal I would like to see because that would mean there’s not a water crisis in the north.”



WHAT ON EARTH IS A MENSTRUAL DISC?

A disc, which resembles a classic diaphragm, is folded and inserted farther back into the vagina than a cup, at the base of the cervix, just behind the pubic bone. Like cups, you can wear most discs for up to 12 hours, but unlike cups, discs can be worn during sex because they don’t block the vaginal canal. Discs—also called flat-fit or circular cups—are harder to find than cups, aside from Intimina’s Ziggy; made-in-Canada Nixit is coming soon.

Suit of cups

Ready to try your hand at using a menstrual cup? Here are five popular options



Diva Cup

The made-in-Canada Diva Cup comes in three sizes—including one for teens; the company is run by a mother and daughter. \$38, [walmart.ca](#)



Mooncup

Launched by two friends in 2002, the Mooncup comes in two sizes and the company is now a certified ethical biz. \$34, [amazon.ca](#)



Lily Cup

Available in two sizes, the Lily Cup’s angled design allows it to be rolled as thin as a tampon during insertion. \$40, [intimina.com](#)



Tampax Cup

The recently-launched Tampax Cup comes in two sizes; its patented design purportedly reduces pressure on the bladder. \$38, [walmart.ca](#)



Lunette Cup

This cup comes in two sizes and six colours—choose pink, and an identical one will be donated to women in need. US\$40, [lunette.com](#)

Are period underwear up for the job?

One intrepid writer goes padless in three popular options

THINX

These nylon-elastane hip-huggers from N.Y.C.-based Thinx look like a sporty take on granny panties, with a gusset that's reportedly able to soak up two tampons' worth of blood. I wore them sans plug on my heaviest day, and they were comfy-ish and leak-free, though by mid-afternoon they emitted an off-putting metallic scent, so I reached for a tampon. I'd wear them again, but on a light day or as backup protection. \$47, shethinx.com



KNIX

Toronto-based Knix's bikini panty with a leak-proof liner is designed to act as backup to your go-to mode of protection or for going solo on light-flow days. I tried a pair minus other trusty hygiene allies and found it readily absorbed and concealed my end-of-cycle dribs and drabs. One caveat: The crotch was a bit stiff to begin with—and after a few hours took on a slightly starchy texture. \$26, knix.ca



LUNA PADS

This Vancouver company makes cute cotton-spandex undies with a pocket built into the crotch, where you insert a washable cotton pad. I wore them on day three, which is traditionally a bloodbath, and the removable liners held up well for about eight hours. The only drawback? The silhouette in my leggings: camel toe in front; soggy hot-dog bun in back. They're good for nighttime but not discreet enough for day. \$36, lunapads.ca



TRIAL PERIOD

MY FIRST TIME WITH A CLOTH PAD

"A few years back, my skin became super sensitive to perfumes and chemicals, so every time I wore pads or tampons I ended up with a lot of irritation. So I switched over to reusable cloth pads. It's not as messy as you might think—the blood gets absorbed. The biggest thing is that the used pad can be embarrassing to carry around, but you can get a reusable bag and just fold it up in there like a present."

—Erika, 36

MY FIRST TIME WITH A MENSTRUAL CUP

"I started using a cup when I was in my late teens. It took me two days to figure out how to put it in properly. I was doing all kinds of crazy gymnastics—one foot up on the tub, squatting and crouching—and then I was like, 'This is ridiculous,' and I gave up. The next day, I took my time and made it work. Now, I love it."

—Heather, 35

Yes, artisanal and alternative period products exist...

...but that doesn't mean you should use them

TEMPTED TO BUY some cute knit tampons or a sea sponge to staunch your flow? Don't: These products could put you at an increased risk for all kinds of infections, one of which is TSS, says Susan Thorne, the department chief of obstetrics and gynecology at Queensway Carleton Hospital in Ottawa. "Blood is a really good petri dish," she explains. According to one study, women who used sea sponges during their periods had significantly more bacteria in their vaginas—including the staph bacteria that

produces the toxins that cause TSS—than women who wore tampons and pads. Homemade tampons aren't any safer; unlike mass-produced hygiene products, they're made without set regulations or protocols, and loosely knit products could encourage the growth of staph bacteria. As well, in contrast to cups and discs, neither menstrual sponges nor knit tampons are approved or licensed for sale by Health Canada.

SLUG

Sidebar text goes here

