



IN FOCUS: ARTICLE

Positive Period Alternatives

by Heather Boerner, 01.16.07

You know the feeling. You're sitting in class. You've got your period. You're wearing a pad or tampon, but you're still worried. Sixteen-year-old Abigail (not her real name) recalls the feeling vividly.

"You sit in class knowing you have it and wondering what's going to happen," she says. "I felt nervous. If something leaked, I'd freak out. Then you have to stand up and everyone sees you. It's potentially disastrous, social suicide."

But Abigail has found a way to avoid that feeling. She uses alternative menstrual products that she says are comfortable and make her feel better about her period.

Slip Into Something That May Be More Comfortable

There are two types of alternative menstrual products that are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration: menstrual cups and cloth pads. "Cups" are small, flexible, latex, plastic, or silicone cups that are inserted into the vagina and catch menstrual flow.

Girls who talked to teenwire.com said using menstrual cups and cloth pads made them more comfortable with their bodies and helped them talk to their doctors about their gynecological health.

For instance, Tracy (not her real name) had been brought up to believe that her period was gross and that she wasn't supposed to talk about it. "My mother wasn't around much to tell me what to do, and I went to a Catholic school where the attitude was that your period is bad and secret," she says. "You weren't supposed to talk about it. You were supposed to put on a pad and that's it."

When her period caused severe cramps every month, Tracy felt alone. But the process of finding and using a menstrual cup got her connected with people who talked about their periods openly, which made her feel more comfortable with her body and her period. "I'm not shy anymore," she says. "Your menstrual cycle isn't that gross; it's part of who you are."

Positive feelings about periods, whether you use cups, pads, or tampons, may even contribute to greater sexual health in relationships. A 2005 study in the *Journal of Sex Research* found that college students who are more ashamed of their periods made riskier sexual decisions. They had less sexual experience than their friends, but when they did have sex, they were less likely to enjoy it.

Keepin' it Clean

Both cups and cloth pads are reusable, which is great for the environment. But you have to keep them clean to keep yourself healthy. It's a good idea to wash the cup with a gentle cleanser every time you empty it, but if that's not possible, you can pour the menstrual fluid into the toilet and rinse the cup with water before putting it back in.

Anyone sensitive to rubber (latex) will have a reaction to the latex cup, like irritation, itching, and swelling. Some cups, like Mooncup and DivaCup, are made of silicone and should be fine for all.

Rinse cloth pads between uses in water and hydrogen peroxide and wash them in the washing machine. If you can't wash them immediately, soak them in water. Tracy keeps a bucket in the bathroom where she soaks her pads until she can throw them in the wash with the rest of her stuff.

The "Ew" Factor

Sharon (not her real name), 20, says she knows a lot of girls have an "ew" reaction to the cup when they first



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hear about it. But for her, after years of heavy periods that sometimes led to menstrual blood dripping down her leg, "the 'ew' had long been drummed out."

In fact, a menstrual cup helped Sharon figure out whether her period was normal. Her periods were heavy, and by measuring how much flow she had each month, she was able to give her doctor specific information about her period.

"As it turned out, I was very near the top end of the bleeding scale, although not at the something-is-very-seriously-wrong point," she says. "It was good to know it wasn't all in my head, and it led to some blood tests. We ruled out some possible problems, such as bleeding disorders."

And Sharon loves that she isn't going through piles of disposable pads every period and that the cup only had to be bought once. For her, she says, it was practically "magic."

Some women might consider cloth pads to be "gross" because you have to wash them. But Tracy thinks it's worth it. "The pads are the most comfortable things I've ever worn," she says.

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