

TAMPAX TAMPONS: TOXIC DEATH STICKS by Meghan Telpner

PART 1

CHEMICAL BEAUTY

Having recently returned from three months of intensive acupuncture in California to treat my recently diagnosed inflammatory bowel disease, I had made the switch to whole, unprocessed, organic foods. I was confident, with my glass food storage containers, natural cleaning products and Teflon-free pots and pans that I was living in a virtually toxin-free, safe and healthy environment. There was one area of my life, however, that I had not done a thorough clean-up, and that involved my personal care products. I thought of the cabinet in my bathroom and the abundance of nicely packaged products lining the shelves. I now believe that perhaps that cabinet should be permanently sealed shut with a biohazard label stuck to the front.

My initial shock did not come from what I found on the ingredient labels, that horror came later. My surprise was that they were there and I had never thought to read them. Having suffered with digestive illness for over three years prior to being diagnosed, it had become habit to check the labels of everything I ate. I don't know why it never occurred to me to check the labels of the products that I sprayed, applied, absorbed, and inhaled. I was shocked to learn that my Crest Toothpaste contained the same artificial sweetening agent found in Sweet n' Low and that cetyl alcohol, the main ingredient in my shampoo, is an end product of the petroleum industry. Both my hair conditioner and hair styling products contain methylchloroisothiazolinone, a known skin irritant and in high concentrations causes chemical burns. It has been removed from most cosmetic products except for those with only short duration skin contact ("Household Products Database"). My expensive facial toner from Kheil's contains imidazolidinyl urea, better known as formaldehyde. It was also present in my eye-make-up remover. There is no telling what chemical reactions are occurring when I dab my formaldehyde ridden eye-make-up remover onto a chlorine bleached make-up pad to remove my triethanolamine (precursor to known carcinogen Nitrosamine and also present in my shave gel) laced mascara, blending it all together on the delicate membrane around my eyes.

As worrisome as the chemicals contained in these products are, I felt mildly reassured by the fact that these products have changed over the years. Whenever I run out, I buy something new, try a new brand. As a result, over the past several months the products I use daily have moved into the organic, lower risk category. The one product however that I have remained loyal to for the last decade and a half is the one that concerns me the most. This product does not list the ingredients on the packaging. This is the only product where the ingredients could not be confirmed through research. This is the product that I give the least amount of thought to, buy out of habit, always in a moment of urgency when I've run out, and is used in the most intimate of areas. This product is Tampax Tampons.

Through careful research, I discovered the most harmful chemicals used in the production process of Tampax Tampons and learned of the horrifying and deadly health effects these chemicals are having on the women who use them. I was horrified to learn of the dangers these chemicals have on offspring, born with chemical body burdens passed on by their mothers. In addition, I looked into alternative approaches to the conventional tampon and found them to be

readily available, more economical and much safer for our own personal health, and the health of the total environment.

PART II

TAMPAX INGREDIENTS: OUT OF SITE OUT OF MIND

The average woman, menstruating for five days a month for 38 years will use approximately 11,400 tampons in a lifetime. With roughly 73 million menstruating women in America (Houppert), the toxicity levels of commercial brand tampons is not just a personal concern but a concern that affects all menstruating women.

Determining the exact ingredients and chemical components in Tampax Tampons is virtually impossible. Despite the fact that tampons are used in a manner that requires contact over an extended period of time with one of the body's most porous and highly absorbent mucous membranes, feminine hygiene products are categorized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a 'medical device'. Therefore, manufacturers are not required to adhere to the same labeling regulations as food, drugs or cosmetics (Bogo). As with toxicity testing for chemical residues in our food supply, testing on chemical levels in tampons is done by the manufacturer or private researcher with findings presented to regulating bodies for review. Essentially, "the scientists researching whether or not tampons are safe are getting their paychecks from the people who make and sell tampons"(Kratz). Therefore, it becomes the obligation of the consumer to do their own research.

Proctor & Gamble, the manufacturers of Tampax brand tampons, are keen to keep secret the chemical-soup tampon recipe. Seeing that North American women spend an average of two billion dollars per year on these chemical laced commercial brand sanitary napkins and tampons (Berezowski), the truth about these toxic products will not be revealed anytime soon.

TAMPAX TAMPONS: TOXIC DEATH STICKS

Originally tampons were made of 100% cotton. When women complained of seepage, manufacturers increased the absorbency by blending the cotton with highly absorbent synthetic fibers including polyester, polyacrylate rayon, carboxymethylcellulose and viscose rayon (Houppert). In the early 80's there was noise made about tampons when 38 women died of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), a bacterial infection linked to the use of high absorbency tampons. Following these events, though denying ties to these deaths, tampon manufacturers changed the formulation of their tampons. In private testing, it was determined that these synthetic materials were attracting the bacteria that lead to TSS. The lesser of the evil synthetics was the rayon/viscose blend and this is what remains in conventional tampons today.

Most tampons are treated with chemicals that have no place in a product to be used so intimately by women. Tampax manufactures tampons from a blend of rayon/viscose and conventionally grown cotton. Approximately "84 million pounds of pesticides are sprayed on 14.4 million acres of conventional cotton grown each year in the US... These chemicals are some of the most toxic used in agriculture and the [Environmental Protection Agency] has declared seven of the top 15 to be 'possible', 'likely', 'probable', or 'known' human carcinogens" ("A Periodic Problem"). The toxic cotton is a problem, but certainly not the only one.

The rayon/viscose used in Tampax is made from wood pulp and hundreds of chemicals are used during the process of converting wood to rayon. The chlorine bleaching of wood pulp is where the greatest danger lies. The process creates chlorinated hydrocarbons, a hazardous group of chemicals with byproducts that includes dioxins, some of the most toxic substances known ("Chlorine Bleaching, Dioxin and Women's Health").

Responding to protest from the consumer and by the US government with the "The Women's Health and Dioxin Act", followed by the "Tampon Safety and Research Act." ("Protect Women from Dioxin and Toxic Shock Syndrome") the tampon industry recently changed its rayon bleaching method to Elemental Chlorine Free (EFC) bleaching. This method replaces chlorine gas with chlorine dioxide (ClO₂), a chemical consisting of two oxygen atoms bound to a chlorine atom.

Chlorine dioxide is recognized for its disinfectant properties, ... [and is] used to control harmful microorganisms including bacteria, viruses or fungi on inanimate objects and surfaces. In 1967, EPA first registered the liquid form of chlorine dioxide for use as a disinfectant and sanitizer. In 1988, EPA registered chlorine dioxide gas as a sterilant. Chlorine dioxide kills microorganisms by disrupting transport of nutrients across the cell wall. (Pesticides: Topical & Chemical Fact Sheets).

Chlorine dioxide is far less reactive with organic materials than the previously used chlorine bleach. With no pure chlorine involved, EFC bleaching should theoretically result in a dioxin free product.

This, however, is not the case. Studies have shown that the manufacturing of chlorine dioxide does not produce a pure product, as tampon manufacturers claim ("Feminine Products"). Most are contaminated with a certain amount of elemental chlorine. As well, in commercial production of these products, chemical reactions that take place during the bleaching process free elemental chlorine atoms from some of the chlorine dioxide molecules ("A Periodic Problem"). This increases the burden of elemental chlorine in the bleaching process, therefore releasing dioxin. "It's for this reason that the Worldwatch Institute has referred to ECF bleaching as a 'low-tar cigarette' strategy" ("A Periodic Problem"). Basically, the new EFC bleaching method lowers the amount of dioxins created, but does not eliminate them completely.

According to "the Environment Protection Agency [EPA], ... no safe level for dioxin exposure exists" (Bogo). The FDA has acknowledged that chlorine dioxide, though elementally chlorine-free, can still generate dioxins at extremely low levels. Very careful wording on the FDA website states that "some elemental chlorine-free bleaching processes can theoretically generate dioxins at extremely low levels, and dioxins are occasionally detected in trace amounts in mill effluents and pulp" ("Tampons and Asbestos, Dioxin, & Toxic Shock Syndrome"). Given that dioxin is cumulative and slow to disintegrate, the real danger comes from repeated contact. I think it's safe to consider five days a month, 12 months a year, for nearly 40 years to be repeated contact.

WHAT IS DIOXIN?

Dioxin is a term used to describe a group of hundreds of highly persistent and highly toxic chemicals that accumulate in the environment and in our bodies. This toxin is a highly dangerous byproduct of many different industrial processes involving chlorine including waste incineration, chemical and pesticide manufacturing, and pulp and paper bleaching (this includes the raw

materials used in conventional tampons). Dioxin is an organochlorine and is produced by a combination of chlorine and organic compounds. As the primary toxic component of Agent Orange, it is considered “the deadliest substance known to humankind”(“Chlorine Bleaching, Dioxin and Women’s Health”), where “literally, a tablespoon [of dioxin] would kill everyone on the planet”(Citrinbaum).

Dioxin is a Persistent Organic Pollutant (POP) that accumulates in the body. Our exposure extends well beyond the monthly tampon contact. This chemical is carried in our air, our waterways, on our food and bioaccumulates in the flesh of the animals we eat. The levels of accumulation increase right up the food chain into our own bodies.

In addition to the levels of dioxin found in our environment and food supply, tampons are not the only personal care item contributing to the dioxin body burden. Similar production processes are used on everything from diapers, toilet paper, paper towel, paper serviettes, cotton swabs, make-up removal pads, facial tissue, and of course, sanitary pads. We use these products around our eyes, our ears, to wipe our mouths and noses and to clean our most delicate parts.

If dioxin contaminated rayon and pesticide soaked cotton weren’t enough, tampons also contain an “abundance of extra chemicals that include absorbency enhancers, synthetic deodorants, and artificial fragrances” (“A Periodic Problem”). The presence of dioxin, however, is of greatest concern as it is of greatest harm to the human body.

HEALTH EFFECTS OF TAMPAX TAMPONS

Looking at the health effects of Tampax Tampons, the hazards certainly include dioxin but also extend beyond the frightening risks posed by this deadly chemical. The synthetic rayon fibers carry their own set of hazards and both need to be taken into account.

DIOXIN IN THE BODY

The risk with dioxin is not about how much is present, but that it is there at all. The “subtle reproductive and health effects occur at doses low enough to present no blatant effects, and is insidiously spreading slowly throughout populations” (“Chlorine Bleaching, Dioxin and Women’s Health”). Dioxin accumulates in humans, particularly women’s body fat and breast milk. The main means of elimination is therefore through the breast milk or the placenta and then begins to accumulate in the fetus and into infancy. The “greatest risk is to developing children and fetuses” (“Chlorine Bleaching, Dioxin and Women’s Health”) as their immune and nervous systems are only just developing. This persistent toxin is not only spreading through populations but through generations.

The accumulation of dioxin in the body is being linked to dozens of illnesses and diseases and can be grouped into three types of responses: those involving enzymes, growth factors, and hormones.

The most recent EPA report, confirms dioxin as a “known human carcinogen” (“Report on Carcinogens, Eleventh Edition”) and this known cancer-causing chemical comes into direct contact with internal organs and very susceptible areas. Studies from Sweden have shown a link

between tampons containing dioxin and an increase in cancers of the female reproductive tract (Helm).

Through activation of the Ah receptor, [dioxin] induces a wide spectrum of biological responses considered important to the carcinogenic process, including changes in gene expression, altered metabolism, altered cell growth and differentiation, and disruption of steroid-hormone and growth-factor signal transduction pathways (Report on Carcinogens, Eleventh Edition).

Such changes are the cause of immunotoxic, teratogenic, and carcinogenic responses.

Tampons are placed up against moist fatty tissue for extended periods of time, creating an ideal environment for chemical absorption in a concentrated area. Dioxin “act[s] as an endocrine disrupter... The changes in hormone and receptor levels results in altered homeostasis”(Filliano), which is the network of feedback mechanisms of the body to maintain a balance of these hormones. One of the diseases most directly linked to the endocrine-disrupting effect of dioxin released from tampons is endometriosis, a disease where endometrial cells from the lining of the uterus inappropriately grow outside of the uterus. They grow on the ovaries, on the outside of the uterus or fallopian tubes, or elsewhere in the abdominal cavity (“The American People's Dioxin Report”). Dioxin “induc[es] an enzyme that increases estrogen levels and results in chronic exposure of the endometrium to growth-promoting estrogen”(Rier). The unchecked growth of endometriosis can cause bowel problems as it strangles the bowels natural movements. It has also been linked to reproductive problems and infertility by making impregnation virtually impossible.

In addition to cancer and endometriosis the enzyme, hormonal and growth disruption caused by dioxin exposure has been linked to birth defects, the inability to maintain pregnancy, decreased fertility, reduced sperm count, diabetes, learning disabilities, immune system suppression, lung problems, skin disorders, and lowered testosterone levels.

RAYON AND ITS REMNANTS

The presence of dioxin is not the only health hazard of Tampax Tampons. Commercially produced tampons use the synthetic rayon/viscose fibers that have been linked to both Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) and an increase in Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

TSS can begin with flue like symptoms including nausea, dizziness, high fever, vomiting and can progress to liver and kidney failure, complete body shock and death. Studies have shown that “rayon creates an ideal environment for the growth of the Staphylococcus aureas bacteria” (“Feminine Products”), which causes TSS. This feature is attributed to the higher absorption level of the tampon that, as a result, leaves behind concentrated amounts of the proteins that these harmful bacteria need to produce their poisons (“A Periodic Problem”).

In addition to increasing the risk of TSS, artificial rayon fibers are abrasive to the sensitive vaginal wall. Tampax Tampons are inserted deep into the vagina with an applicator and expand lengthwise. This causes the tampon to push against the cervical area causing tiny cuts and imbedding pieces into the tissue of both the cervix and vaginal wall (Citrinibaum). In addition to the cuts made by the tampon itself, removing the tampon not only leaves fibers behind but also causes further ulcerations.

These ulcerations are caused by the combinations of the chemicals in the tampon and by friction caused by tampon removal. The chemicals in the tampon are literally “eating away at the vaginal

tissue”(Citrinibaum). These ulcerations increase a woman’s risk of contracting an STD by creating little portals into the blood stream. To make matters worse, genetically modified cotton used in the United States for commercial cotton production resists the effects of antibiotics. Therefore, women who use commercial tampons with GMO cotton may not respond as readily to antibiotics prescribed to treat the STD (Citrinibaum).

WITH MY OWN EYES

In my research, I had read about the microscopic fibers and chemicals left behind by tampons and absorbed directly into the fatty tissue and blood stream and the mini experiments that can be done at home to observe this. I tried this myself, placing a tampon in a glasses of water for 6 hours (the average time a women uses a tampon) to see, with my own eyes, what was left behind. When I removed the tampon from the glass, I found hundreds of fluorescent white, tiny, thread-like particles floating around, some settling to the bottom, others hugging the edges. Given the amount of particles that were clearly visible to the naked eye, I can only imagine the volume of microscopic chemicals and fibers that are present in the vagina and embedded into the vaginal tissue with every tampon use.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

What is harmful to our bodies is also harmful to the environment and it is impossible to examine one without the other. Tampax Tampons affect the environment both in terms of chemical pollution and landfill waste. For example, epidemic problems from dioxin exposure is occurring in over 13 species of fish in the Great Lakes, including infertility and birth defects with the most profound effects showing up in the offspring of exposed species (“Chlorine Bleaching, Dioxin and Women’s Health”). As well, because Tampax’s raw materials are sourced, in part, from conventional cotton, they directly contribute to the toxins sprayed on these crops and released into the environment. Finally, Tampax Tampons are just plain wasteful. According to waste consultant Franklin Associates, “6.5 billion tampons and 13.5 billion sanitary pads, plus their packaging, ended up in landfills or sewer systems in 1998... And according to the Center for Marine Conservation, over 170,000 tampon applicators were collected along U.S. coastal areas between 1998 and 1999” (Bogo). Now that I know better, I can do better.

PART III

SAFER ALTERNATIVES: MUCH MUCH SAFER

FOR INDUSTRY

Though effecting change for industry is challenging, when it comes to tampons, it is not impossible. Consumer noise has forced change in the past, and has helped pass safety bills with the US senate. Though mass production will not be coming to an end, there are much safer treatment methods. Returning to 100% cotton tampons would reduce the risks associated with the rayon fibers and there is a dioxin free bleaching method available for mass production. Totally Chlorine Free (TCF) bleaching uses no chlorine compounds thus reducing hazardous chemical output into the environment and residue in the product. The bleaching chemicals produce no

dioxins, chloroform or hydrochloric acids and reduce chemical and biological pollution of waters. This EFC bleaching uses relatively harmless substances such as oxygen, ozone and hydrogen peroxide which will significantly reduce the total toxic discharge into the environment (“Chlorine Free Processing”).

FOR THE CONSUMER

There are several options available to women. These options are not only safer for our own personal health, but are also more optimal solutions when taking the health of our planet into account. The alternative solutions, available for purchase online and in most health food stores, include the easy switch from conventional tampons to organic tampons, natural sea sponges, eco-friendly reusable pads and the menstrual cup.

All Natural Organic Tampons

All natural, organic tampons are made from non-GMO certified organic cotton. They are free of irritating dyes, fragrances, rayon and all the risks that accompany rayon. Choosing certified organic cotton, chlorine-free tampons “reduces the amount of dangerous chlorinated toxins and pesticide pollution in our environment and helps keep chlorinated toxins and pesticide residues out of [the] body”(“Our Products”). These tampons function in the exact same manner as conventional tampons and come in a variety of absorbencies with or without an applicator. It is advised to use the lowest absorbency needed to avoid any potential risk of TSS. Organic tampons are only marginally more expensive than conventional tampons and some brands to look for include Terra Femme, Natracare, Eco Yarn, and Seventh Generation.

Silk Sea Sponge Tampons

Sea sponges are small creatures that grow in colonies on the ocean floor. When “sea sponges are harvested, millions of egg and sperm cells are released into the surrounding water, making the sponge a renewable resource that provides an ecologically sound product for menstrual use”(“Lunapads”). Natural sea sponges work the same as a tampon: worn internally to absorb the menstrual flow. As with tampons, they need to be changed every few hours; however, the sea sponge is not thrown away. Another dry sponge may be inserted or the used one is rinsed and reinserted. They are completely natural and biodegradable and are not treated with any chemicals or bleach. They do need to be boiled before use and must be washed between uses with natural cleaning methods including solutions of vinegar and water or baking soda and water (“Lunapads”). A package of 2 sea sponges, will cost between \$7 and \$12 and can be reused for up to 8 months.

Reusable Pads

Though not technically an alternative to tampons, as most women use tampons for the comfort and invisibility, many also use pads for reinforced protection or overnight use. There are two versions of reusable pads available. The all-in-one padded ‘period panties’ are made from 100% organic cotton, and feature “a permanent gusset panel of 100% cotton fleece for amazing comfort and performance”(“Lunapanties”). The company Lunapanties offers three choices from Regular for daily needs, Light which can be used as back-up protection to other methods, and Deluxe that have a built-in nylon lining and ric-rac bands to hold liners for light to heavy menstrual flow. There are also cloth pads available that act as regular sanitary pads. They usually do up with a small clasp, come in a variety of dark 100% organic cotton colours and can be washed by hand or in the washing machine. Bloodsisters.org offers a printable pattern and easy to follow directions to make a reusable pad at home.

Menstrual Cup

The menstrual cup, first invented in the 1930's, has gained popularity given the TSS scares and increasing awareness about the presence of dioxin. Menstrual cups collect the fluid, generally hold twice as much liquid as tampons and as there is zero risk in TSS (no cases reported), the cup can be left in twice as long. Though this method does force women into closer contact with their bodies and blood, it also appears to be the most risk free, maintenance free, environmentally friendly and economic choice. There are several options to choose from.

Instead Cups, are flexible soft cups and available at most drugstores. They are however disposable and are slightly more expensive than conventional tampons. Though they do not protect against STDs or pregnancy, one of the selling features is that they can be worn during sexual intercourse.

The reusable, and therefore more economical and environmentally friendly menstrual cups include The Keeper, The Mooncup and The Diva Cup. All three products are virtually identical. Both The Mooncup and The Diva Cup are made from medical grade silicone where as The Keeper is, made from natural gum rubber (latex). All three products hold about one ounce of menstrual blood (the average period releases two to four ounces over five days). Since these menstrual cups, can be worn for up to 12 hours, most women only need to empty them twice a day, in the morning and evening. They can essentially be inserted and forgotten. They come in two sizes, one for before childbirth and one for after childbirth and the device has a life expectancy of ten years. An advantage to these products, as they have no harmful byproducts or residues, is that they can be inserted when the period is expected, to avoid any accidents. The upfront cost for these reusable products is high at about \$38.00, but when compared to the ten year cost for tampons, the value is clear:

Tampax Tampons: \$5.00 monthly x 120 months = \$6000.00

Reusable Menstrual Cup: 0.32 monthly x 120 months = \$38.00

ALTERNATIVE FEMINE HYGEINE RESOURCES

Most of the products mentioned can be purchased in any health food or natural products store.

They are all also available online through the following websites:

www.softcup.com

www.gladrags.com

www.keeper.com/

www.bloodsisters.org

www.lunapads.com

www.divacup.com/

www.tampontification.com

THE DECISION IS SIMPLE. MAKE THE CHANGE

Dioxin makes its home in the fatty tissue of women's bodies and builds numerous irreversible and often fatal diseases. The presence of rayon in the vagina creates a Petri dish environment for bacterial growth leading to TSS. The ulcerations left behind by the rayon fibers act as welcome mats for STDs. All of these factors combined with the absorption of chemical and fibrous residues into the blood stream are part of one big scary toxic stew and Tampax Tampons are readily stirring that pot.

The choice of feminine hygiene products is personal, and every woman must decide what is best for her. It is comforting to know that there is an abundance of options available. Information on all

of the options is readily available with this information, women will feel empowered and motivated to make the decision that is right for them.

Having recovered from the initial shock over what is lurking in the pretty bottles hidden away in my biohazardous cosmetic cupboard, I must decide what to do with these harmful products. I will replace the products that I use on a daily basis like my toothpaste and deodorant. As for the make-up and hair products; I plan to reduce both the frequency of use and the quantities used, as replacing everything would be both wasteful and expensive. As for the little toxic sticks of death that remain in the Tampax Tampon box, I guess I am about to find out how useful they are in cleaning up spills around the house. They certainly aren't going anywhere near my body.

Though it is beyond our individual control to eliminate all of the toxins found in our living and work environments and neighbourhoods, being educated on how we can reduce or eliminate the ones that are in our control will ultimately make a difference to our own health and the health of the planet and the health of generations that follow.

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