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It was only recently that Always changed their packaging to cardboard boxes from plastic bags.



A Bloody Problem Period.

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A walk on the beach can be turned into a mournful march for the sea-creatures that are stranded among piles of disposable plastic. A swim in the ocean can reveal startling truths as garbage islands float closer. A city outing with friends can cause detours due to plastic litter in the streets.

These are just some scenarios of the horrors of single-use plastic items. 18 billion pounds of plastic ends up in the oceans each year (“Plastic”). Don’t worry, there is hope to prevent any further suffocation from plastic trash.

Traditional focus on single-use plastic items is a good step and recently, cities across British Columbia are implementing “zero waste” strategies.

Yet, these strategies have missed another item that is perhaps even more prevalent than the to-go coffee cup. These elusive items are disposable feminine hygiene products. It is a risky topic that nobody wants to talk about.

But the figures disagree. According to the 2016 Coquitlam census, around 37,395 women of menstruating age live in the area (“Census Profile”). The average amount of years of menstruation is 38 years and the lowest average amount of tampons used is 8,000 (“Planet Friendly Periods”). To do the math, at the lowest numbers, that would be 7,872,632 tampons used a year in Coquitlam alone.

This just an estimate, but to think that over 7 million tampons will end up in the landfill in one year from one small city is shocking. However, Tampons like to walk away from landfills and end up on beaches as *The Guardian* found out. They reported that the Marine Conservatory estimates 20% of a hundred meters of shoreline is covered in trashed personal care items including tampons.

The calculation only uses tampons, but it is realistic to consider menstrual pads into the situation as well. Both items cannot be flushed down the drain and are made nearly in entirety out of plastic or semi-synthetic materials (“The Unflushables”, “The Ecological Impact of Feminine Hygiene Products”). At least dioxins, which are harmful to the environment, are now banned from bleaching processes (“Natracare”). But, is that enough?

Single-use menstrual products are a plastic-y mess of packaging and finicky components. Many brands such as Kotex still package in plastic bags, which the detriments to the planet need not to be mentioned. Other brands have moved on to cardboard boxes, but their contents are still wrapped in plastic. Still, menstrual pads have a plastic backing and waxed paper strips.

The most popular brand of tampons in Canada, Tampax, uses a cardboard box, but depending on the type of tampon, the entirety of the tampon could be made out of plastic. Take Tampax Pearl for example, the applicator is plastic with colour, the core is “cotton and/or rayon”, and the string is “cotton with propylene

braid” (“Tampax Tampon Ingredients: What's In Our Tampons?”). The list doesn’t include the fabric surrounding the core which is “polyethylene and polypropylene” and the thread which is polyester. Its sister brand, Always, has less plastic but still contributes to landfills like all disposable sanitary napkins.

“I have a huge problem with the packaging that goes into single use female hygiene products,” commented Carmen Kim, a student at the University of British Columbia.

For many, it is a problem, but not enough to warrant a solution. This is due to gender norms for the female population that have been set by men (Thorpe). Menstruation is often seen as “dirty” and menstrual items tend to be discreet because of that reason. Most women are afraid of men realising their bloody secret.

It is still possible to change the habit. Instead of conventional pads or tampons, try to find plastic-free pads and at least applicator free tampons. They often use organic cotton as well. Many women have found success with Natracare which offer plastic free tampons and pads. If switching is not possible, even using a reusable tampon applicator such as the ones that Thinx sells is also a good exchange. Menstrual subscriptions such as Blume and Cora deliver organic, plastic free disposable supplies to the doorstep.

For those willing to take larger steps, consider washable options such as period underwear, menstrual cups and cloth pads. Vancouver based and made Lunapads are also B-Corp certified, ensuring ethical and sustainable practices. Finnish company Lunette, British company Mooncup and Canadian company Diva Cup all make menstrual cups in several sizes and are compliant with local health authorities. Canadian brand Knix and American Thinx make period underwear that can hold up to two tampons’ worth of menstrual fluid.

Switching to reusables or plastic-free will reduce plastic in the beautiful waterways of British Columbia and save money. It is commonly known that reusables can last as much as ten years. The initial cost is large, but worth it in the long run.

“I am getting [resuables] soon because the amount of waste created by single use pads is lucrative and the price is worth it considering I can use them for a longer period of time than just the regular pads I use now!” said Kim before she purchased Lunapads.



Common packaging of pads and tampons. Both are covered in colourful plastic wrappers.

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