

# Sustainable Periods



POLSKIE STOWARZYSZENIE  
**ZERO  
WASTE**



**zero  
waste**

*supported by*

• **Visegrad Fund**

# Table of Contents

Menstruation FAQ .....	3
Impacts of Single-Use Menstruation Products	
– Environmental Impacts .....	5
– Economic Impacts .....	7
– Health Impacts .....	9
Reusable Menstruation Products	
– Reusable Pads .....	11
– Menstrual Underwear .....	13
– Menstrual Cup .....	15
– Menstrual Disc .....	18
Where To Buy? .....	20
Sources .....	21

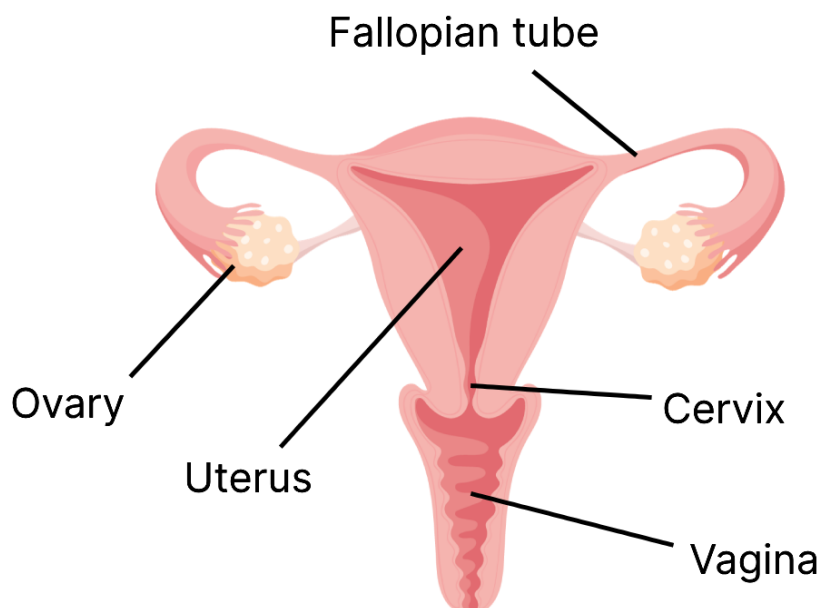
# Menstruation FAQ

## What is menstruation?

**Menstruation is the monthly shedding of the lining of your uterus.** Menstrual blood – which is partly blood and partly tissue from the inside of uterus – flows from uterus through cervix and out of body through the vagina.

Menstruation is **driven by hormones**. The pituitary gland and ovaries make and release certain hormones at certain times during a menstrual cycle.

These hormones cause **the lining of the uterus to thicken**. This happens so that if a pregnancy would occur, an egg can implant into a uterine lining. Hormones also cause the ovaries to release an egg (ovulation). The egg moves down the fallopian tubes, where it waits for the sperm. If a sperm **doesn't fertilize that egg**, pregnancy doesn't occur. **The lining of an uterus breaks down and sheds**. This is menstruation.



### **What is a menstrual cycle?**

Menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of last menstrual period until the first day of next menstrual period. Every person's cycle is slightly different, but the process is the same.

### **How long is a normal menstrual cycle?**

The average length of a menstrual cycle is 28 days. However, a cycle can range in length from 21 days to about 35 days and still be normal.

### **At what age does menstruation typically begin?**

People start menstruating at the average age of 12. However, it can begin as early as 9 years old or as late as 16 years old.

### **How long does a normal menstruation last?**

Between three to seven days.

### **How much blood comes out?**

It may look like a lot of blood, but a girl usually only loses a few "tablespoons" of blood during the whole period. It is around 60 ml.

### **Will I have periods for the rest of my life?**

When women reach menopause (around age 45–55), their periods will permanently stop. Women also won't have a period while they are pregnant and some time postpartum.

# Impacts of Single-Use Menstruation Products\*

\*by single-use menstrual products are meant disposable menstrual pads, disposable daily pads and tampons



## Environmental Impacts

Most disposable pads are made up to 90% non-recyclable plastic.

In 28 EU countries in 2017, about **50 billion units** of disposable menstrual hygiene products were used, which amounts to around **590,000 tons** of waste per year. This is approx. 4% of the total amount of the household waste.



**4% of  
municipal  
waste**

In 2017 the number of females of reproductive age (13-49) in the EU-28 was 118,213,566 representing approximately 23% of the total population. Meaning that **at least 23% of the total population menstruates** and therefore it can be assumed that uses menstrual products regularly.

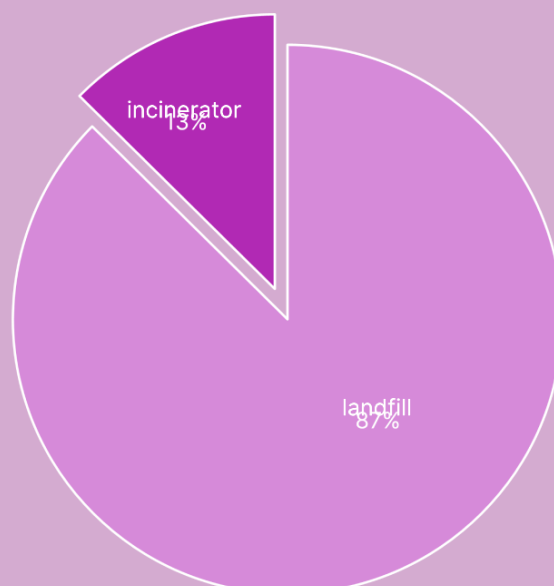


**416  
single-use  
products per  
year**

It has been considered that on average a menstruating woman consumes 32 single-use menstrual products (pads or tampons) per period and 416 products annually (if you assume 13 periods per year). That would mean that **each menstruating woman uses about 14,000 menstrual products in their lifetime.**

An average menstruator generates 5.3 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions while using the disposable menstrual products for a year. That is, **245,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per year are generated from the disposable menstrual products in the EU.**

In the 28 EU countries **87.4%** of used disposable menstrual hygiene products, used baby diapers and used wet wipes end up in **landfill** and the rest **12.6%** are **incinerated**.





## Economic Impacts

Single-use menstrual products require a monthly purchase. The amount that a woman will spend on these products varies from country to country.



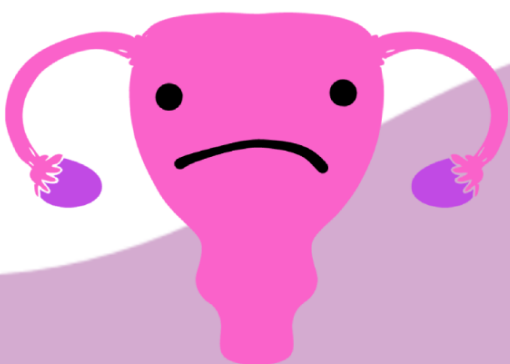
**luxury product**

Extra costs are also paid for the removal and disposal of this type of waste. Or to eliminate clogging from soil pipes, which occur from flushing single-use pads and tampons.

There is a term “**menstrual poverty**” which describes the lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, handwashing facilities, or waste management. The strongest effect menstrual poverty has on teenage girls: it prevents them from going to school, and participating in sports and social activities, and can cause health problems. They may also find it difficult **to talk** to their parents or friends **about their feelings around periods**, leaving them with a sense of **shame and isolation**.

More information about period poverty:  
<https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/how-does-period-poverty-have-negative-effect-teenage-girls>

More information on the environmental, economic impacts of single-use menstrual products in the next report:  
<https://zerowasteeurope.eu/library/the-environmental-economic->







## Health Impacts

Single-use pads can **rub sensitive skin**, cause steaming.

Synthetic fragrances that are added to single-use pads can contain up to 3,900 chemicals (styrole, chloromethane, chloroethane, chloroform, acetone and others); some of these substances are **carcinogens, neurotoxins, can cause irritation, disorders of hormonal and reproductive systems.**



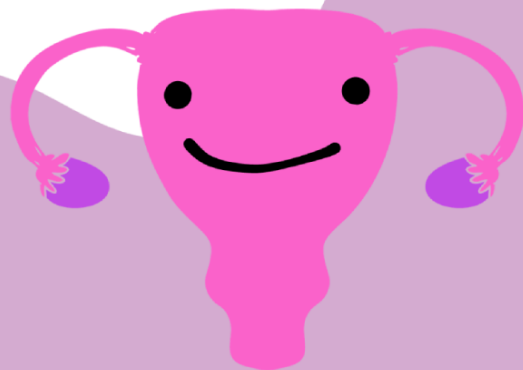
**3900  
chemicals**

Tampons in rare cases can cause **toxic shock syndrome**. It is a life-threatening condition caused by bacteria getting into the body and releasing harmful toxins.

You can find out more about potential harmful substances in single-use menstrual products here:  
<https://womana.dk/do-menstrual-products-contain-harmful-substances/>

**Reusable products** are an alternative to single-use plastic menstrual products. You can make your period **more sustainable, safe and wallet-friendly** by choosing reusable menstrual products.

# **Reusable Menstruation Products**



# Reusable Pads

– to replace disposable pads



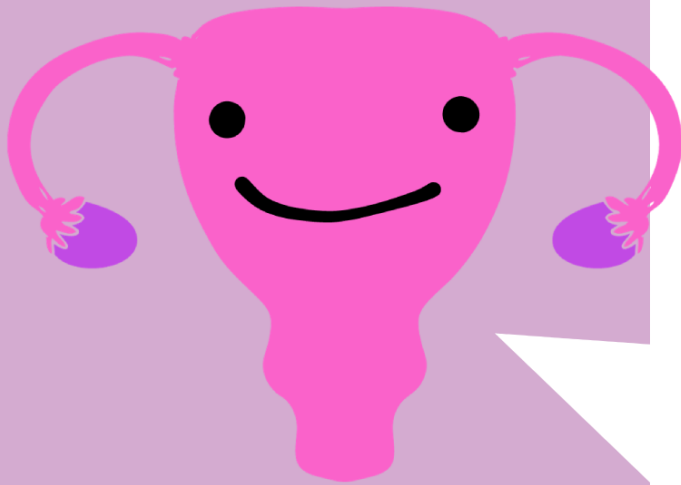
They look just like disposable pads, but they are made of fabrics – cotton, wool, linen, flannel – and, in most cases, they have a layer waterproof membrane that protects against leaks. Metal or plastic poppers are the most commonly used way to secure cloth pads to the underwear.

## How to use

- Change them in every 3-4 hours.
- Used pads can be placed in reusable bags that are securely closed and waterproof, they are called wet bags.
- You can wash it in the washing machine, but before after using it's better to rinse well with cold water.

## How to choose

Reusable pads can be in different sizes, with different lining. You can choose according to your preferences and the intensity of the bloodflow. The basic starter kit it about 5 different pcs to try and then you can choose which models you like.

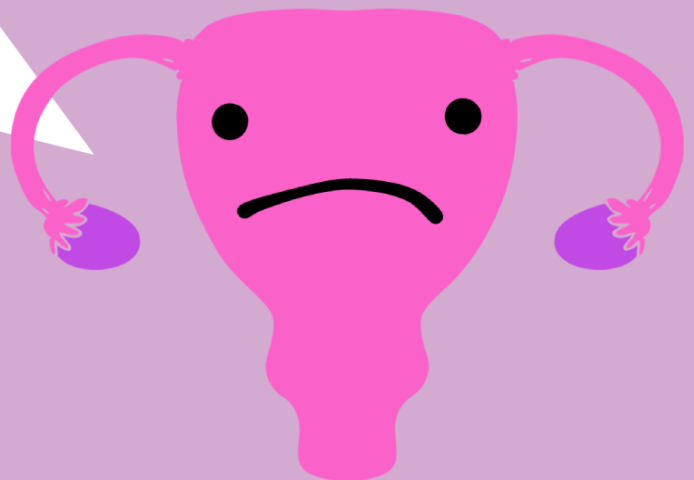


## Pros

- Reusable, typically one pad last for up to 5 years, making it more economical
- Makes less impact for the environment
- More wallet friendly in long perspective
- Compared to single-use pads, they do not have the super absorbent polymer layer (SAP) which forms the liquid into jelly. In this way the blood starts to oxidize and smells quicker. Reusable pads do not have a smell if they are changed in time.

## Cons

- You need to wash it
- Buying stock of necessary pads is more costly at the beginning



# Menstrual Underwear

– to replace disposable pads



They look like regular underwear but they have several layers of linen in bikini zone. Usually it is safe and comfortable material on the outside (cotton, flax (linen), hemp) and the membranous middle, which actually prevents leaks. Sometimes there is an extra layer e.g. from bamboo which absorbs the liquid even more.

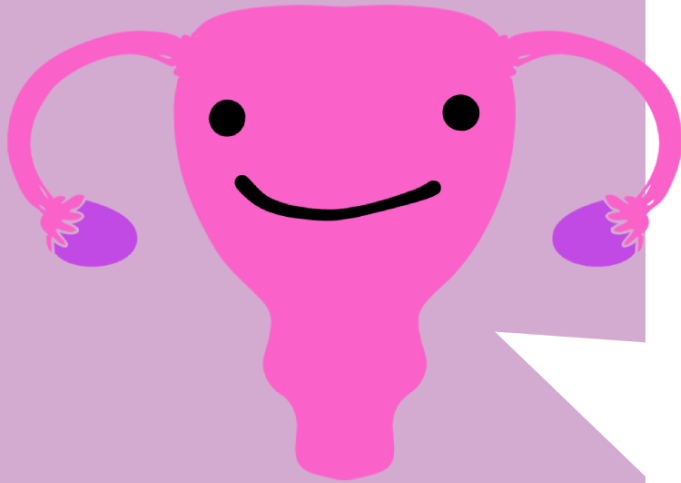
## How to use

- Change due to your bloodflow, but doctors recommend to change every 3-4 hours.
- Used pants can be placed in reusable bags that are securely closed and waterproof.
- You can wash it in the washing machine, but before after using it's better to rinse well with cold water.

## How to choose

Due to your size of regular underwear and absorbency preferences.

For one period you will need 5-7 pcs. If you will use them as backup for menstrual cup, you will need 2-3 pcs.

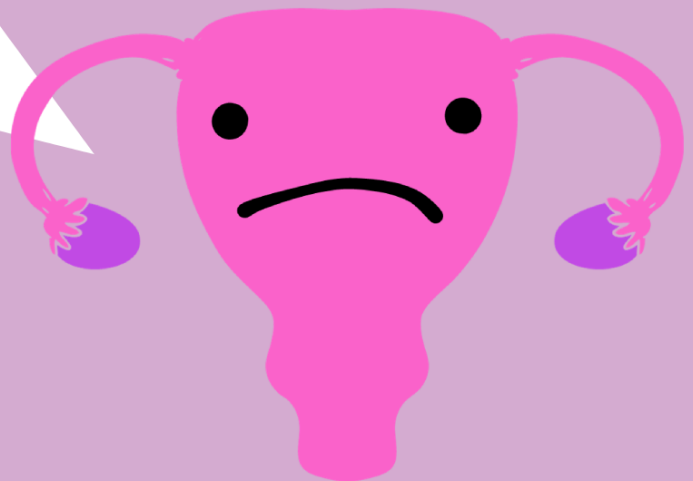


## Pros

- Reusable, so typically one pants last for up to 2 years, making it more economical
- Makes less impact for the environment
- More wallet-friendly in the long term
- It is comfortable to use and it can be used as a backup from leaking menstrual cup

## Cons

- You need to wash them
- Buying stock of necessary underwears is more costly at the beginning



# Menstrual Cup

– to replace tampons



Menstrual cups are generally bell-shaped, with a few exceptions. Most brands use medical grade silicone, as the material for the menstrual cup. Menstrual cup must be placed to a small depth in vagina, where it collects menstrual blood.

## How to use

- To insert a cup wash your hands, check if air holes of a cup are clear. Fold the cup into C-shape. Take a comfortable position (while sitting, standing or squatting) and insert the cup into the vagina. There it must unfold and create a vacuum. To check that the cup has fully opened, slide a clean finger up to the cup bottom and feel it. (There are other techniques too, to insert a cup.)
- You can keep inside the vagina up to 12 hours (but doctors recommend changing every 3-4 hours).



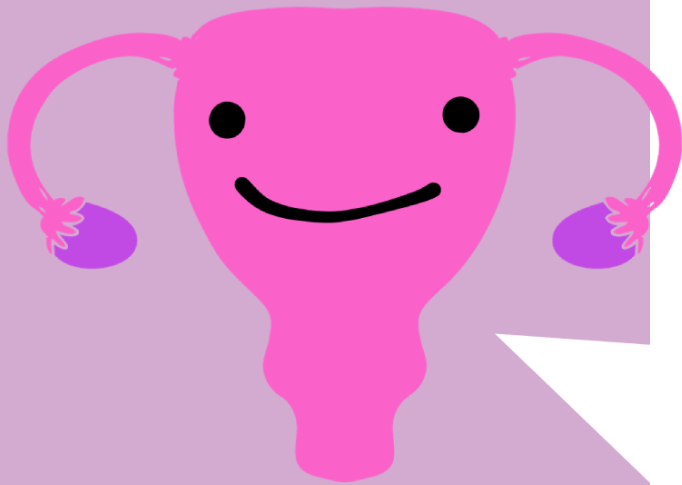
- To remove the cup wash your hands and relax your muscles. Grasp the bottom of the cup. To break seal, squeeze the bottom of the cup. Be sure not to pull it out by holding the stem alone. Tip contents into the toilet. Rinse it. (If you want to wash it with soap, only use P.H. neutral one, and rinse thoroughly with water afterwards.)
- Before and after the cycle, you need to sterilize (boil for 4-6 minutes long) the cup.



## How to choose

The size/length of the cup depends on the height of the cervix. There are usually three types: low, medium and high cervix. The width/capacity of the cup depends on the menstrual flow. The elasticity (hard, semi-hard and soft cups) depends on how active a person's lifestyle is. For sports, a hard cup is recommended. For painful cramps, a soft cup is recommended. The material of the cup is quite important, look for the medical grade silicon.



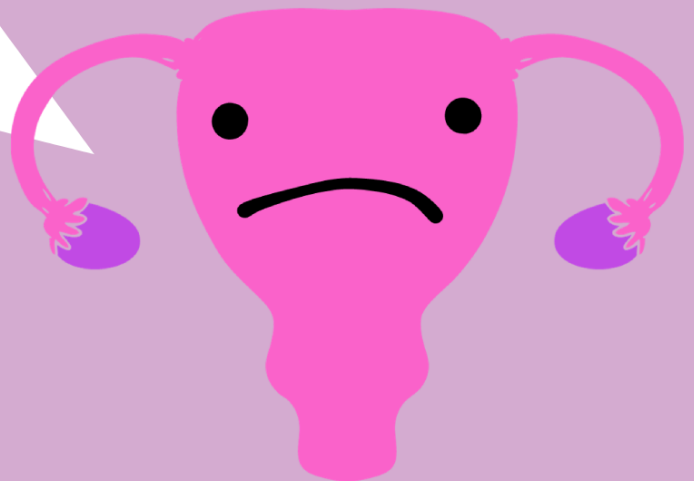


## Pros

- typically one menstrual cup last for up to 10 years, making it more economical
- Makes less impact for the environment
- More wallet-friendly in the long term
- With proper use the risk of leakage is minimal
- Virgins can use a menstrual cup, for more information visit your doctor

## Cons

- Not easy to use for beginners
- Higher cost for the first cup compared to a tampon



# Menstrual Disc

– to replace tampons



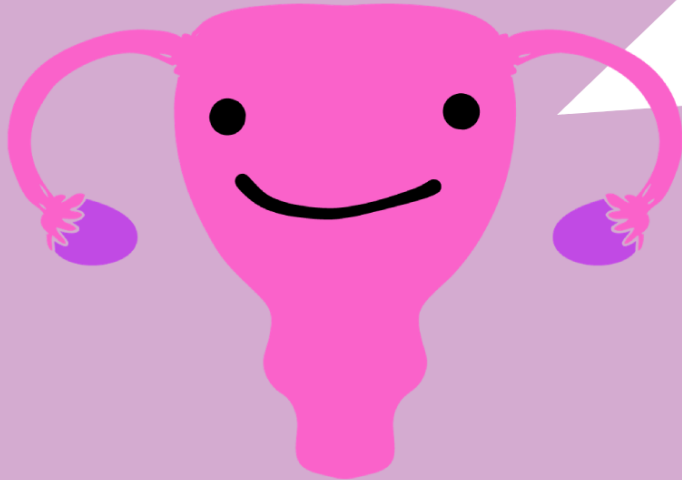
It is a flat, flexible disk that collects blood. Main difference from the menstrual cup is that disc fits back into vaginal fornix, where vaginal canal meets cervix, after pubic bone.

## How to use

- To insert a disc wash your hands. Squeeze the sides of the disc together, making it the size of a tampon. Take a comfortable position (while sitting, standing with one leg up or squatting) and insert the pinched disc pointing down and back into your vagina. Make sure you push it past the pubic bone as far as it can go so the rim tucks in just above the bone.
- You can keep inside up to 12 hours (but doctors recommend changing every 3-4 hours).
- To remove the disc wash your hands and sit on the toilet (removal of disc might be messy). Reach into your vagina with your index finger and hook it under the rim, pulling it straight out. If you can't reach the disc – try to bear down with your pelvic muscles like you're trying to poop, so the disc will move down. Rinse it. (If you want to wash it with soap, only use P.H. neutral one, and rinse thoroughly with water afterwards.)
- Before and after the cycle, you need to sterilize (boil for 4-6 minutes long) the disc.

## How to choose

Available in one size.

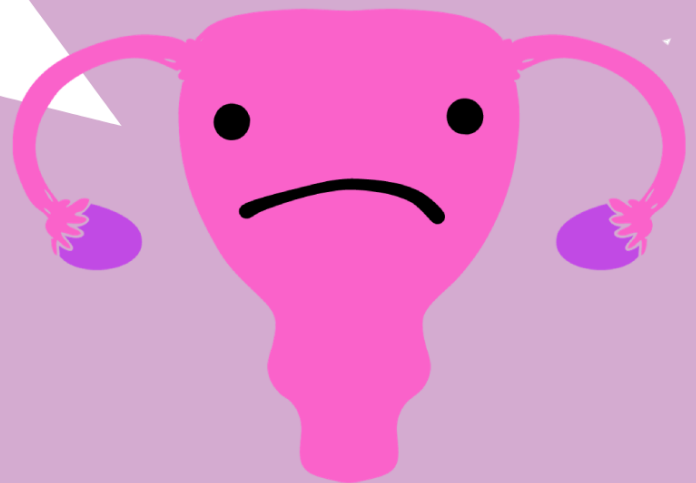


## Pros

- Makes less impact on the environment
- More wallet-friendly in the long term

## Cons

- Not easy to use for beginners
- Not suitable for virgins and postpartum
- Higher cost for the first cup compared to a tampon.
- There is no vacuum, so the blood can start oxidizing, it should be changed more often



# Where To Buy?

Reusable menstrual products mostly can be purchased online or in zero waste or eco shops.

Menstrual cup or discs can be found in sex shops or intimate boutiques.

Also reusable menstrual products can be found on big marketplaces. We recommend to choose local manufactures to make your choice more sustainable.



# Sources

Emilla,  
<https://emilla.me/>

Cleveland Clinic,  
<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/10132-menstrual-cycle>

UNICEF,  
<https://www.unicef.org/wash/menstrual-hygiene>

Womena,  
<https://womena.dk/do-menstrual-products-contain-harmful-substances/>

Zero Waste Europe,  
<https://zerowasteurope.eu/library/the-environmental-economic-costs-of-single-use-menstrual-products-baby-nappies-wet-wipes/>

The project was supported by the  
National Visegrad Fund in 2023.

## SuPer – Sustainable Periods



• supported by

• Visegrad Fund

