



# WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

OUR HEALTH. OUR FUTURE. TOXIC FREE.

## Period Product 101 Toolkit Series 1

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### Who is Women's Voices for the Earth

Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE) drives action towards a future free from the impacts of toxic chemicals rooted in gender justice alongside those historically and presently ignored by the environmental health movement by leveraging an intersectional solidarity approach based on our expertise in research, advocacy and organizing.

For more information about who we are visit: WVE- [Who We Are](#)

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## How To Use This Toolkit

This toolkit includes links to WVE resources where you can learn more about toxic chemicals in period products as well as recommendations of actions to take. Your voice is important and powerful! You can use this toolkit to help create change for the better, for yourself and your community.

We understand it can be hard to talk about period products. We want to emphasize these key points:

- There is no shame in menstruation. It is a perfectly healthy bodily process.
- It is not just women who menstruate. The experiences of transgender or gender nonconforming people are valid, and their needs are critical to our mission of building healthier communities.
- There is no perfect product. We all have diverse needs, and we are and should be able to choose the best products for us, our needs, and our bodies.
- Women's Voices for the Earth has done extensive work and research to provide you with information so you can make the best decisions for yourself.
- We envision WVE as a community that is accessible, intersectional, and empowering for LGBTQIA2S+ people, young people, Black people, Indigenous people, Native people, Latinx people, Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander people, refugees, immigrants, people with disabilities, and working-class people. We honor and recognize the intersectionality of these identities.

As we continue to grow and deepen our work, we envision WVE as a community that is accessible, intersectional and empowering for LGBTQIA+ people, young people, Black people, Indigenous people, Latinx people, Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander people, refugees, immigrants, people with disabilities, and working class people. We honor and recognize the intersectionality of these identities. And when we say disproportionately impacted people we are clear that we are talking about people at these intersections. We strive to put solidarity into action as we build this community.

**Bottom line: Toxic chemicals don't belong in menstrual care products. Period.**

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## WVE Resources | Use What You Learned

### Nanosilver in Period Products

#### **Potential effects of nanosilver-containing period products on vaginal and vulvar tissue:**

The immediate proximity of underwear and menstrual pads to vulvar tissue and vulvar/vaginal mucous membranes implies the possibility of migration of the antimicrobial agent to these highly sensitive tissues. Unfortunately, the potential health impacts of the migration of nanosilver to vaginal tissue increases the potential impacts of nanosilver exposure.

April 2019

# Nanosilver in Period Products

In recent years, the use of nanosilver as an antibacterial agent has greatly increased. Nanosilver is very small (microscopic) particles of silver. It is now commonly incorporated into athletic clothing to make it “antibacterial” in an effort to reduce odor. It has also been incorporated into certain period care products including absorbent menstrual underwear, and some menstrual pads (generally those pads marketed as containing an “anion strip” or other “ion technology”). It should be noted that while nanosilver is the most commonly used antibacterial agent in these products, some manufacturers do not specifically disclose that they are using silver, instead merely claiming that their products are “antibacterial”. The purpose, according to manufacturers, is to provide antibacterial properties to these products with the aim of decreasing the growth of “harmful” and/or odor-producing bacteria. Unfortunately, there are several adverse human health and environmental risks and concerns associated with nanosilver use. There are also several specific reasons that nanosilver may be especially inappropriate to use around sensitive vaginal and vulvar tissue.

[Click here](#) for more Nanosilver in Period Products Information.

## What's in Period Products?

### A Timeline of Chemical Testing

When we wrote the [“Chem Fatale” report](#) on the potential toxic chemicals in intimate care products in 2013, there was very little scientific research available on the potential chemical exposures from the use of menstrual products such as tampons and pads. We were able to identify just two published studies on chemicals in tampons, both of which measured levels of dioxins and furans. The lack of data was unfortunate given the prevalence of use (roughly half the population) and the long-time exposures (monthly use of these products for many decades) with direct contact to highly sensitive and absorptive vulvar and vaginal tissue.

We set out to change this by commissioning some initial testing of menstrual pads for volatile organic compounds in 2014. Following the release of our results, several organizations, media outlets and governmental health agencies from around the world initiated their own testing of the chemical exposures from these products. These tests have raised important questions about the potential health impacts of these exposures.

**While a few studies have attempted to assess and measure potential risks of these products, all have indicated that there is more work to be done to better understand the impacts these products may have.**

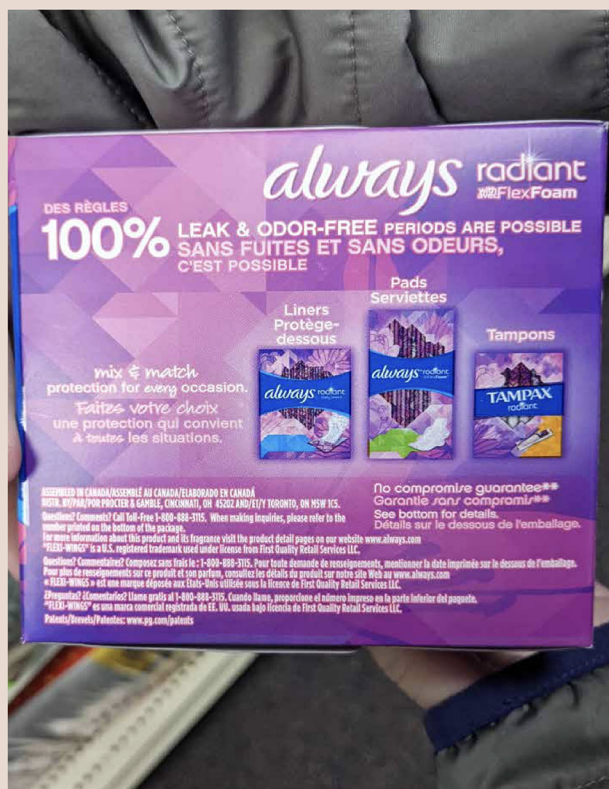
Access the [Timeline of Chemical Testing Here!](#)

## What Does Ingredient Disclosure Currently Look Like?

Our 2022 [field study](#) revealed that most period product companies are disclosing ingredients in a list following the word “Ingredients”- similar to what one might find on a personal care product or food. We observed real progress in improving the information available to consumers about chemical exposures from period products as a result of a New York state law (A-164) which required ingredients on packages for the first time. This law went into effect in the fall of 2021.

Below is one example of how a product's packaging has changed. The package on the left was photographed in November 2021 in a state with no requirements for ingredient disclosure. A photo of the same product taken in a NY store (on the right) shows the updated packaging now including ingredient information.

Older package - no ingredients



Newer package - with ingredients



Ideally, every period product label should include as much helpful information about ingredients as consumers would need to make an informed choice. Every ingredient intentionally added to the product should be listed on the outer package so that the user knows what ingredient exposures are associated with use of the product. [Learn more about potentially harmful ingredients here!](#)

Additional information about the ingredients will also help users better understand how products



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and brands differ from one another. Additionally, ingredient labels should be displayed clearly and conspicuously. Consumers should not have to hunt for ingredient disclosure. It should be made prominent, in readable font on the packaging, in language consumers can understand. This information will help product users make informed choices about the products best for them.

Note: The following recommendations, from [WVE's What's in Your Period Products report](#), go above and beyond the current requirements of the New York law.

## **There are 3 pieces of information that should be provided for each ingredient:**

### **1. The Chemical Name of the Ingredient:**

This should be specific enough to uniquely identify the ingredient being used – and should not simply describe what kind of ingredient it is. Ideally, over time manufacturers should harmonize their nomenclature, so that all brands use the same name for the same chemical. As a start, INCI (International Nomenclature Cosmetic Ingredient) names should be used for the many ingredients where applicable.

### **2. The Component of the Period Product Where this Ingredient was Used:**

This information helps the user understand where this ingredient would be found in the product in order to determine if the ingredient would have direct skin exposure, would be placed inside the body, etc.

### **3. The Function of the Ingredient:**

The function description should provide a simple explanation of what this ingredient does in the product. This helps the user understand why this ingredient has been included in the product. Knowing the function of ingredients can also help a user distinguish differences between similar products.

For more information view WVE's report: [What's in Your Period Product? An investigation of ingredients disclosed on product labels](#), or see our [fact sheets](#).

Español: [¿Qué aspecto debe tener una etiqueta de ingredientes de los productos para la menstruación?](#)

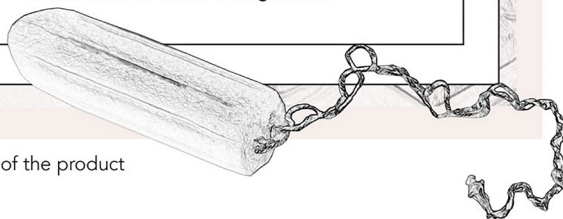
Español: [¿Qué existe en su producto para la menstruación?](#)

## What's in Your Tampon?

### Mockup of sample tampon label:

Ingredient:	Function:
<b>Absorbent Core*</b>	
Rayon.....	Absorbs menstrual fluid
Cotton.....	Absorbs menstrual fluid
<b>Outer layer/cover*</b>	
Polyethylene.....	Cover for absorbent core to aid removal
Glycerin.....	Coating on outer layer to wick fluid
Oleyl alcohol.....	Coating on outer layer for smooth removal
Titanium Dioxide.....	Colorant to make tampon whiter
<b>Removal string*</b>	
Polyester.....	Removal string
Paraffin.....	Coating to waterproof string
Titanium Dioxide.....	Colorant to make string whiter

\* Bolded terms are components of the product



### Concerns with the newly disclosed chemicals in period products:

- Some of the newly disclosed ingredients in these products (like fragrances, colorants and waxes) are potential allergens or irritants that could lead to skin rashes or allergic reactions in some users. Both fragrances and colorants are merely aesthetic features that are unnecessary to the efficacy of period products. These features should simply be eliminated to avoid posing irritation or allergy hazards.
- Some of the newly disclosed ingredients (such as PEGs and other ethoxylated compounds) may be contaminated with ethylene oxide and/or 1,4 dioxane, which are both linked to cancer.
- Some of the ingredients (such as polyethylene, polypropylene and polyester) are plastics – which may lead to release of microplastics to the body as well as to the environment after use and disposal. A recent study found that a single tampon has the potential to release billions of nanoplastics during use.

## Glossary

Clarification of a few common terms used in this report:

**Period product:** A period product is any product used for the purpose of collecting or absorbing menstrual discharge. For this report, we specifically looked at tampons, menstrual pads, period underwear, menstrual cups and menstrual discs.

### Ingredient or Additive:

By "ingredient" and "additive" we mean the chemical name of any intentionally added substance in a menstrual product. For example, a tampon may include ingredients such as "cotton" or "polyethylene" which also may incorporate additives like "glycerin" or "polysorbate 20". Period underwear may be made of "cotton" and "spandex" and may include a waterproofing additive like "polyurethane".

**Component:** Menstrual products may have several parts or "components". A menstrual pad for example may have a "topsheet", an "absorbent core", and a "backsheet" which are each components which make up the product. A component can often contain more than one ingredient.


**Function:** The term "function" refers to the term which describes the purpose of a particular ingredient or component. For example, "adhesive" describes the purpose of a coating on the back of a menstrual pad which allows it to adhere to underwear. "Ink" indicates a colorant used in a product. Both ingredients and components may have associated functions.

## 2018 Tampon Testing Results

### Our Results:

			TAMPONS					
Chemical Name	Units	Concern	Tampax Pearl (Scented)	UbyKotex Fitness	Playtex Sport (Scented)	Safe & Soft (Dollar Store)	Seventh Generation	Natracare
Carbon disulfide	ppbv	Reproductive toxicant	22.0	2.3	23.0	9.9	—	—
Methylene chloride	ppbv	Carcinogen	—	—	15.0	29.0	—	—
Methyl ethyl ketone	ppbv	Irritant	—	—	2.4	—	—	—
Ethyl acetate	ppbv	Irritant	—	—	1.2	—	—	—
m,p-Xylene	ppbv	Neurotoxin, repro toxicant	—	—	1.0	—	—	—
Heptane	ppbv	Skin irritant, neurotoxin	—	—	0.6	—	—	—
Hexane	ppbv	Neurotoxin	—	—	—	7.5	—	—
Toluene	ppbv	Reproductive toxicant	—	—	—	0.5	—	—
# of chemicals of concern detected			1	1	6	4	0	0
— indicates not detected								

All samples tested were super absorbency, with applicators, purchased in NY or MT



In April 2018, we sent six popular brands of U.S. tampons to a lab to see what we could find out. We tested for volatile organic compounds – a suite of over 100 toxic air pollutants that can be tested for simultaneously. We discovered that for some brands there appears to be more complexity (and chemical emissions) than others.

### What do these results mean?

The results tell us that there may be ingredients (or contaminants associated with ingredients) in tampons leading to exposure to chemicals of concern. It is important to note that there is no available research on potential health impacts from vaginal exposure to these chemicals. These results confirm neither a known level of danger, nor do they establish a threshold of safety for these exposures. What these results do indicate, however, is that there is more that we need to know about what tampons are made of and what kinds of chemical exposures they may lead to.

Read the full [2018 Tampon Testing Results here](#).

#### Conclusion:

These results reinforce the need for both better ingredient disclosure and more health research on period products like tampons. It is reasonable to want to know about the presence (or absence) of a reproductive toxin, carcinogen, irritant or allergen in a tampon. Improved ingredient disclosure which could indicate the presence or absence of chemicals of concern would aid in making informed choices of period products. And we need to pass laws that require universal disclosure of ingredients in these products to ensure consistency in labeling. Advances in research on health impacts of period products can help us better understand and prevent the potential impacts of these exposures.

## Take Action!

### The Problem

Research shows that many of today's menstrual and intimate care products contain a host of chemicals linked to cancer, disrupt hormones, and unnecessary allergic reactions. Tampons are used by up to 70 percent of menstruating people in the U.S. Other products such as douches, sprays, washes, and wipes, are used by 20-50% of women, with use rates considerably higher among Black, Latina and low-income women. The FDA does not require companies to test for all harmful chemicals, nor do they require companies to disclose the presence of all chemicals used in these products.

Given the widespread use of these products, the unique route of exposure, and the lack of regulatory oversight, WVE is working to eliminate toxic chemicals from the \$3 billion U.S. period and intimate care products market.

#### Here is why this is a serious problem:

- WVE's test results show harmful chemicals in Always pads and various brands of tampons, and our research found toxic nanosilver in period underwear and menstrual pads.
- Other testing results show dioxins, furans and pesticide residues in tampons, which have been linked to cancer, reproductive harm, and hormone disruption.
- Studies link menstrual pad use to vulvar allergic rash in some women. Both adhesive chemicals like methyldibromo glutaronitrile and fragrances used in pads have been identified as causes of these allergic rashes.
- Fragrance is commonly used in pads and tampons, and many fragrance ingredients are kept secret.
- The harmful chemicals in these products come into contact with some of the most absorptive skin on our bodies.

#### Avoiding Harmful Ingredients:

- Bookmark our Chemicals of Concern fact sheet so you can reference it when shopping for period and personal care products.
- Reduce your use of intimate care products, especially those that are medically unnecessary for a healthy vulva and vagina.
- Choose unscented products where available, especially in tampons and pads.
- Choose chlorine-free bleach or unbleached tampons and pads.
- If you are having allergic symptoms, switch brands, and then tell the company why you did by calling the 800 number on the label.
- Report any symptoms possibly resulting from these products to the FDA by calling 1-800-332-1088 or filling out a consumer report form.



## Recommendations for Choosing Safer Period Products.

Share these factsheets with your friends and others you think would benefit from this information!

### Recommendations for Users of Period Products:

To find safer products for your health and the environment:

- 1.** Read ingredient listings on the product package and/or website.
- 2.** Look for products that do not contain plastics (ingredients like polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene).
- 3.** If possible, select products that contain 100% cotton, without additional plastic layers.
- 4.** Look for products made with simpler and fewer ingredients
  - a.** Avoid fragranced products
  - b.** Avoid products with colorants
  - c.** Avoid products with additives like PEGs, which may be contaminated with ethylene oxide or 1,4 dioxane.
- 5.** Pay attention to any symptoms that occur during the use of a product – and try another brand for a month to see if it makes a difference.

Use your voice to demand safer and healthier products:

- 1.** Call the 1-800 number or send an email to your products' manufacturer asking about their ingredients.
- 2.** If there are ingredients you are unfamiliar with, ask the manufacturer questions about what these ingredients are, and how they might affect your health.
- 3.** If you switch brands, call the company to tell them why you no longer use their product.
- 4.** Talk to friends and family about your concerns with chemicals in period products – and encourage them to read labels and ask questions too.



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## Safer Menstrual & Intimate Care Products!

This bill requires the research we need to continue to do our important work on menstrual and intimate care issues. Will you raise your voice in support of more research on the impact that ingredients used in menstrual and intimate care products may have on users' health?

Recently, the [Robin Danielson Menstrual Product and Intimate Care Product Safety Act of 2023 \(H.R. 5957\)](#) was introduced in Congress. If passed, the bill would require a research program focused on studying the health risks of fragrance ingredients, pesticides, phthalates, titanium dioxide, and other ingredients used in these products.

We know products like douches, washes, wipes and sprays can contain additives linked to hormone disruption, allergens and more. And [new disclosure requirements](#) have revealed chemicals used in tampons and pads which can cause skin irritation & allergic reactions, may contain toxic contaminants that can cause cancer, and release microplastic particles into the environment. Research also finds nanosilver and PFAS in period underwear and pads.

To email your officials, we have an easy way! [Click here!](#)

## SUPPORT MENSTRUAL EQUITY!

[The Menstrual Equity](#) movement works to ensure that anyone who menstruates has the right to access safe, affordable products, and has the right to know exactly what ingredients they are being exposed to in the products.

Look to see if there are menstrual equity bills in your state that you can support - check out our Menstrual Equity Bill tracker here: <https://womensvoices.org/bill-tracker-menstrual-equity-policies-in-the-united-states/>

**We can't choose whether or not we get a period. Period products are not luxury items—they are an essential need, and there are severe consequences if people don't have what they need to control their flow. [We can stand up and raise our voice to ensure that everyone who does get a period has the right to affordable, accessible, and safe period products.](#)**

## SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT!



## Break Free From Stigma!



### Interested in Our Stories, Our Flow?

While we all have unique needs, experiences, and preferences, taking care of ourselves and loved ones should never put our health, wellness or confidence at risk. The Our Stories, Our Flow workshops are an interactive community conversation to center and de-stigmatize the way we talk about, experience, or have experienced menstruation AND to understand safe, sustainable reproductive health products for all ages.

We enthusiastically welcome all gender identities who have experience and/or a relationship with menstruation.

For questions, want to host your own OSOF workshop or for more information contact, Trennie Burch, WVE's Network and Organizing Manager at [trennieb@womensvoices.org](mailto:trennieb@womensvoices.org). [Learn more here!](#)

## Follow Us & Donate!

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equitable future!

