

# Brief: Menstrual Cups

## Menstrual cups - a global solution to a global problem

### WHAT IS A MENSTRUAL CUP AND HOW DOES IT WORK?



A menstrual cup is a small container made from medical-grade silicone, or plastic elastomer which is placed inside the vagina to collect menstrual flow. Silicone cups are hypo-allergenic and contain no additives. A single cup lasts around 10 years and is small enough to carry in a pocket or bag without being noticed.

The cup sits below the cervix and suction keeps it in place. It holds about the same amount of blood as 3 pads or tampons, so lasts three times as long. When placed correctly inside, the cup cannot be felt, and wearers cite comfort and a sense of freedom.

The cup is emptied and rinsed (or wiped dry, if water is not available) before reuse. Any toilet or private space can be used to empty and replace the cup. Unlike pads or tampons, there is no risk of blocking toilets or sewage systems (over 70% of UK plumbing blockages are due to tampons & menstrual pads; and in resource-poor contexts, septic tanks and pit latrines are particularly vulnerable to blockage). Unlike using pads or tampons, there is no need to carry and hide soiled products until a discrete place can be found for disposal. Some recommend pouring boiling water (about half a tin's worth) over the cup between periods.



### SAFETY: WHAT ARE THE SAFETY STANDARDS FOR MENSTRUAL CUPS?

A 2019 systematic review and meta-analysis in [The Lancet](#) ( sponsored by the UK Medical Research Council, UK Department for International Development and the Wellcome Trust) **affirmed the safety of menstrual cups**. The NHS summarized the Lancet findings [here](#) saying that cups are a "safe and effective alternative to pads and tampons" with clear endorsement of their safety. This study was conducted by researchers from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, University College London and the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in the UK, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Bill and Melina Gates Foundation in India, and the Kenya Medical Research Institute in Kenya.

There are no global standards for safety and quality of any menstrual products (including cups); the [Swedish Institute for Standards](#) is currently developing international standards around all menstrual products.

There have been questions raised about using a menstrual cup with an IUCD but this has been disproven and this [FAQ](#) is available.

Currently menstrual cups are not recommended for post-partum bleeding (Lochia), because they have not been tested in this capacity. The cervix is possibly slightly more open post-

partum than during menstruation, so infection is possibly a greater risk. However, this is an area that would benefit from careful research.



### WHO'S BEHIND IT?

The menstrual cup is not a new invention. It was invented by an American woman and patented in 1937.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, two women in Brighton, UK, made the first medical-grade silicone cups, at first advertised for women to use at music festivals. The product caught on through word-of-mouth with little commercial marketing. The rising popularity of the cup is therefore a testament to the positive reviews which women have given one another. The Menstrual Cup Coalition is a voluntary affiliation of organisations promoting its widespread use, research and information. Partners are listed on the web and include an impressive list, working in 40 countries.



### WHERE IS IT BEING USED?

Today the cup is used by women in over 100 countries in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa (including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, and India).<sup>2</sup> Cups have been used all over Europe, USA and Australia for two decades, especially by young women concerned about the environmental impact of single-use pads and tampons. In 2020, the UK Department for Education committed to providing free menstrual products, including menstrual cups, to all state primary and secondary schools and sixth-form colleges in England.<sup>3</sup> The demand is now noted by big retailers, with companies such as Walmart in the US and Boots and Sainsbury's in the UK now stocking them. Over the last 10 years companies have reported that sales have been growing at double digits.<sup>4</sup> While successful projects have proven demand and usage of menstrual cups in the global south (particularly for economic and comfort reasons), access remains the biggest challenge with menstrual cups simply not available in many countries or for those who cannot order them over the internet.



### CUP COSTS

Cup costs vary by brand: a quality cup costs on average US\$10. The Menstrual Cup Coalition have negotiated prices of below \$1 per cup if purchased in bulk for charitable projects. On Amazon and online platforms these are typically available for around US\$25 - usually two sizes are sold together to allow a new user to get the right fit. The Coalition does not promote individual suppliers and leaves those decisions to partners, although does provide recommendations if asked, based on positive feedback of users and location.

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<sup>1</sup> Goddard, L.J. US Patent #1,891,761 (December 1932). <http://www.google.com/patents?id=W75tAAAAEBAJ>

<sup>2</sup> The Lancet Public Health, July 16, 2019 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30111-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30111-2/fulltext)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/period-products-in-schools-and-colleges>

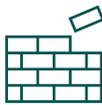
<sup>4</sup> BBC Business Reporter, October 2018, 'Why are Menstrual Cups becoming so popular?', [Why are menstrual cups becoming more popular? - BBC News](#)



## ACCEPTABILITY

The greatest contribution to cup usage and successful uptake is appropriate education and follow-up advice. Eventually, as has happened with tampons, when use is sufficiently common, women and girls will teach each other.

A major barrier to introduction of cups is lack of knowledge among governments and donors. Contrary to expectation, religion has not been a barrier to acceptance: cups are used by Muslims in Kenya & Malawi, Hindus in Nepal and India. This [FAQs](#) is a helpful resource regarding acceptability by Muslims, and [this](#) referring to myths around virginity.



## SOCIAL & DEVELOPMENT BENEFITS

Menstrual cups help to remove barriers to attending school or work, and participating in society, and their range of benefits are enormous. Menstrual cups can also be used as an effective entry point to discuss health education and sexual and reproductive health more broadly. Girls and women using cups, anywhere in the world, in any context – school, field, home or office, can concentrate more and so are more productive for their families and economies.

The savings made from using menstrual cups counter the poverty associated with menstruation. In the UK, the charity Bloody Good Period has estimated that women spend nearly £5000 on period products in a lifetime. In Kenya, there has been documentation of girls exchanging sex for pads and facing unwanted pregnancy or STDs, including HIV, as a result. When provided with menstrual cups, the individuals, along with their fathers and husbands, appreciate the savings, leaving more money for food and school books.

In many settings, women use rags to absorb their menstrual blood, instead of being able to buy products. This can cause discomfort, infections and social shame associated with leaking and smelling, meanwhile significantly limiting movement. Menstrual cups provide a freedom which ensures everyday life is no longer interrupted by periods.

These BBC articles give examples of girls using cups in Malawi, including the importance of the health education that goes with them, and the educational benefits for girls attending schools.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-48389920>

(a longer version) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-48389920/this-invention-from-the-1930s-is-cutting-period-poverty>

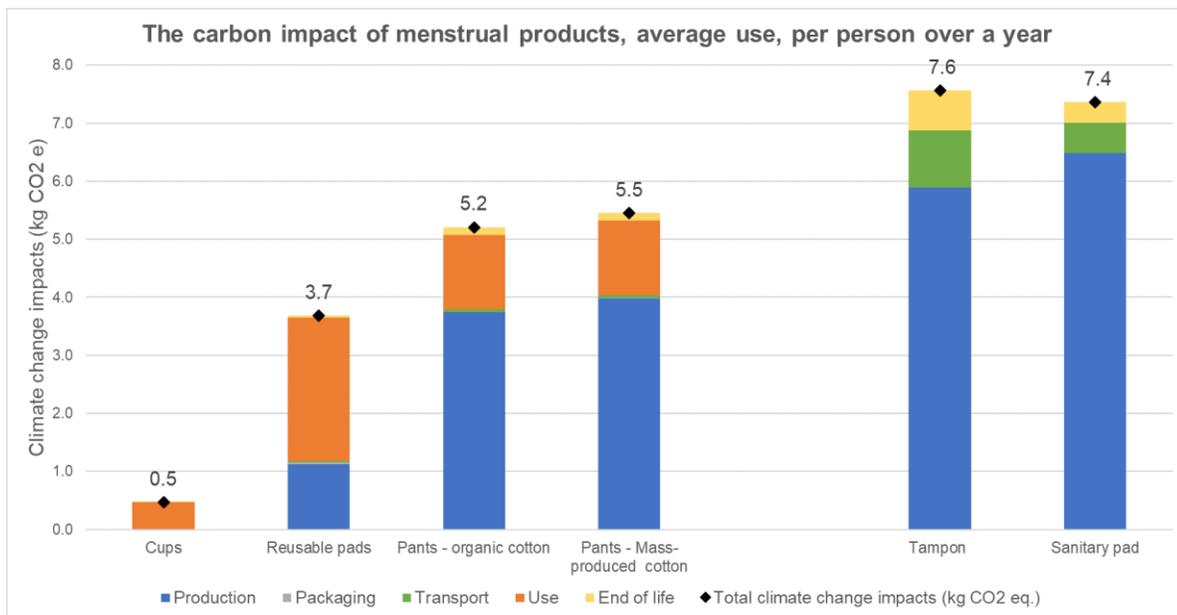


## ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Single-use period products are the fifth biggest source of plastic on beaches, take over 500 years to decompose, block sewers, fill landfills, and create air pollution if burned.<sup>5</sup>

In her lifetime each woman using pads and tampons fills the equivalent of two minibuses with waste. In some countries, sustainable options such as washable pads and absorbent period underwear are available. However, they still require 14 litres of water per month to wash. Comparatively, silicone menstrual cups are reusable for up to 10 years and have a minimal impact on the environment. Instead of using 2,600 pads or tampons, each cup requires only 15 grams of silicone, derived from silica sand, an abundant material with minimal environmental impacts and they use half a cup of water to wash each month.

The primary constituents of single-use menstrual products include cotton, paper, wood pulp and plastics, plus water and fuel, which all have carbon, resource use and ecological



footprints. Manufacturing 'disposable' menstrual products creates air and water pollution, and whether burned or buried, their disposal creates greenhouse gases such as methane, CO<sub>2</sub>, dioxins and furans. Using a comparative life cycle assessment over 1 year, the environmental impact of a reusable menstrual cup is less than 1.5% of the impact of tampons or towels.<sup>6</sup> Analysis by Zero Waste Scotland in 2019 identified that a woman switching from tampons to menstrual cups, which last around 10 years each, would use **16 times less carbon**, saving 7 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e over a year.<sup>7</sup> [Graph from [The carbon impacts of menstrual products | Zero Waste Scotland](#)]

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, *Impact assessment – reducing Marine litter: action on single-use plastics*, May 2018. [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/single-use\\_plastics\\_impact\\_assessment.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/single-use_plastics_impact_assessment.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [Dataset: Feminine hygiene product lifecycle inventory and impact assessment - ScienceDirect](#)

<sup>7</sup> [The carbon impacts of menstrual products | Zero Waste Scotland](#)

## NEGATIVE PRESS AND FORCES AGAINST



The media has featured non-medically reviewed anecdotes of negative effects of menstrual cups, including unidentified women who stated to have had uterine collapse, IUCDs falling out, toxic shock syndrome or septicemia. These things do happen to women, who might

also be using a cup, or other menstrual products. There is no proven connection however between a menstrual cup and any of these events.

Manufacturers of single-use 'disposable' menstrual pads and tampons, and the toilet-disposal industry have a vested interest in maintaining their markets.

**Periods are part of life; but still shrouded in shame, and wrapped in plastic.**

**The planet, and women, deserve better.**

10<sup>th</sup> December 2020