

Sanitary Products Then and Now

A brief look into the development and stigmatization of menstrual hygiene throughout history

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Introduction

Menstruation historically is riddled with misinformation and myths. The word “taboo” comes from the Polynesian term “taboo” which means “menstrual flow” and “sacred”. The implied meaning is that menstruation is the original taboo. Now, how did this affect women and how they dealt with their periods?

Ancient people seem to have avoided describing women's periods. 4,000 years of recorded history with six diverse cultures and there is almost no information on menstrual cycles in the ancient times. Historians speculate that a reason is because the majority of scribes were males writing on behalf of male patrons therefore even if menstruation was discussed they would not have considered it worth a mention on the stone monuments their slaves were creating. A different theory for the lack of discussion is ignorance or fear. In ancient times if they did not have the 'why?' for the thing women go through every month, they most likely deemed periods as sorcery.

Ancient Egypt:

There is no concrete evidence of menstruation in ancient times due to the lack of documents however, there are pieces of information and many theories. One of which is that a form of tampon was made out of softened papyrus. Menstrual blood was considered sorcery and was used in medical treatment as well as spell casting.

Ancient Greece:

In ancient Greece the tampons were made by wrapping bits of wood with lint. Equally so, women used sea sponges which are still used today! The Greeks had a ritual that every spring, before planting, menstrual blood mixed with wine would be spread over the field. It was to aid in sympathetic magic meant to increase the fertility in the soil.

Medieval:

In Medieval times menstrual cycles were shamed by religion and were seen as dirty. A view of cramps was that they were a 'reminder of Eve's original sin'. The church thought periods were evil and did not make any pain relief available. Though at that time they did not have the technological advancement to make advil, there were herbal and natural aids to ease pain that

were not offered to women on their period. Women would resort to burning a toad, and wearing the ashes around their neck to ease cramps because there was a belief that frogs could cure several ailments. The cure for a heavy flow was to boil a toad and put the ashes near the vagina or apply powdered toad medicine. A widespread view of the menstrual cycle was that the blood, if drunk, would cause leprosy while others believed it cured leprosy.

Periods in the 1800s:

Throughout the 1800s the word 'period' was starting to be used as a term for menstruation. Women would wear skirts and dresses which meant they would have to pin cotton and flannel into their underwear. The rubber apron was invented and was a strip that ran between the legs to prevent blood from getting on clothes. The rubber apron is smelly and uncomfortable however prevents furniture from stains. Another option for women in this time period were menstrual belts which are cloth belts onto which fabric can be pinned like a pad. The first commercially available pad- Lister's Towels- hit the market. However periods were widely seen as a massive taboo so women did not want to be seen purchasing the pads making the endeavor fail.

Periods in the 1900s:

At the beginning of the 1900s false myths on women's menstrual flow were still being published. Professor B. Schick came up with the concept that the poison in women's menstrual flow "menotoxins" is what causes flowers to wilt and wine to spoil. Essentially, men were still publishing outdated ideas in the medical community. The modern pad was invented in WW2 by French nurses and they were developed for commercial sale. The packaging was changed on the brand Lister's Towels to "Nupak" which would not show the purpose. The packaging was equally elusive. For total discretion, what would happen is a consumer would leave a nickel on

the department store counter after taking a box of pads for total discretion. Tampons were developed from having no applicator and being leaky to being the modern version we have today. Earl Haas was the man who made the modern tampon however it was Gertrude Tendricj who created the company Tampax. The myth surrounding tampons at the time was that if used, you could lose your virginity. In 1975 when ultra absorbent tampons made from carboxymethyl and polyester hit the market, there became an awareness of TSS (toxic shock syndrome), due to the material being a breeding ground for bacteria. It is important to note that 1985 was the first time ever that the word “period” was spoken out loud in an ad for Tampax.

Present day:

In recent years, there is more of a trend towards transparency and broader consumer awareness. Certainly feminine care and sanitary products have evolved and come a long way. There is still more to do though! As a growing number of individuals and organizations push to dissolve the concept of menstruation being taboo and clubs such as Project Imagine aid in giving girls access to period products, there is hope that in our lifetime periods will be seen as a natural bodily function. With Project Imagine’s help, we aim to spread awareness and help end stigmatization of periods with one pad at a time.

Works Cited

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