

Since the dawn of time, women have been experiencing menstruation.

A year after NPR named 2015 the year of the period, entrepreneurs are still fighting the good fight—to end period shaming and make menstruation mainstream.

By Lola Thelin

THE NEW ERA OF TAMPONS

For such intimate products, tampons get no love, from the FDA, which regulates feminine care but doesn't require companies to list the ingredients because tampons are classified as medical devices, to the same humdrum brands that have dominated the aisles for decades but rarely disclose the ingredients in their product. Which makes us wonder: What is in a tampon?

"The typical tampon is made of viscose rayon, a highly absorbent synthetic created through a chemical-heavy process and then bleached to achieve a bright white cotton appearance," says Molly Hayward, co-founder of Cora, a privately owned company waking up the feminine care market by providing all-natural and convenient options. Cora, a subscription-based company launched in 2016, positions itself as a design-led experience that is fully aligned with a woman's lifestyle and values. "We've considered every aspect of the period management experience and its pain points and solved them in our offering," Hayward says. This means an organic cotton tampon in a compact BPA-free applicator packaged in a soft and silent wrapper, plus a little black box for storing tampons in your home and a little black clutch for carrying them throughout the day. "We believe this is how period management should be treated—as integral to women's lives instead of an afterthought," she says.

Founded by Alex Friedman and Jordana Kier, Lola products are hypoallergenic and contain no synthetics, additives or dyes. In 2015 Friedman and Kier were the first to launch a customizable subscription service offering 100-percent organic tampons. Lola offers a compact BPA-free plastic applicator or a non-applicator option. The construction of the tampon expands widthwise instead of lengthwise, and it's available in industry standard sizes: light, regular, super and super plus. "The feminine care industry was stale for a long time, so innovation was overdue," Kier and Friedman say. "Until recently, women weren't thinking about or discussing their feminine care habits or products with other women. We've seen a huge



Erik Tanner

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 Jordana Kier and Alex Friedman (above, left to right), founders of Lola



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shift and believe we've started a national conversation around the importance of brand transparency as well as destigmatizing the topic of menstruation."

The organic tampon and pad subscription box Kali includes 10 individual Kali wipes, 10 organic cotton panty liners and a rotating period pampering product in every box of 100-percent certified organic cotton tampons. "We're seeing women pay a lot more attention to what goes in their bodies in general, and tampons are no exception—especially if you're having issues like endometriosis, vaginitis, consistent infections, uterine fibroids or fertility issues," says Sara Shake, who cofounded Kali with Jonna Piira. "Many women are finding out after the fact that the chemicals in their feminine care products could have contributed to these problems."

THE ALTERNATIVES

It's not all tampons and pads. FLEX is probably the most innovative product to enter the feminine care market, solidified by more than \$4 million dollars in seed round. The menstrual disc is a class II medical device worn internally and works by covering the cervix, collecting fluid instead of absorbing. "Because of its position, it leaves the vaginal canal free of obstruction, which can help alleviate cramps and allows for mess-free period sex," says Lauren Schulte, founder and CEO of The Flex Co. In addition, FLEX is made of a proprietary blend of medical-grade polymers. "These materials were chosen because they do not disrupt the pH of the vagina and have antimicrobial properties," Schulte says. "It's made without natural rubber latex and is vegan and hypoallergenic."



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Seeing a recent resurgence in popularity are menstrual cups, which were originally invented in the 1930s. At the forefront are the Ruby Cup and DivaCup, both made of 100-percent medical-grade silicone. “Consumers are becoming more savvy and educated,” says Daniela Masaro, brand marketing manager of Diva International Inc., creator of The DivaCup. Its product is a bell-shaped menstrual cup, free of chemicals, plastics and dyes. The cup is worn internally and collects menstrual flow, providing 12 hours of leak-free protection. “In today’s world of disposable products, consumers are looking for products that will not have a detrimental effect on their health or the environment,” she says. DivaCup is recommended for one-year use.

The menstrual cup is here to stay. “It’s a product that is getting noticed more and more. Five years ago, market data available was close to zero, but this year the first market report on menstrual cups appeared [and] predicts a four percent annual growth,” says Amaia Arranz, strategic partnerships manager for Ruby Cup. The initial reaction toward the menstrual cup is usually skepticism—but after a learning curve, something happens. “It’s like something changes in your mindset,” Arranz says. “You feel more clean, you feel nicer during your period and you start to get this wow feeling and begin asking, ‘Why did I not know about this hundreds of periods ago?’” Ruby Cup can be used for up to 10 years.

There’s also Thinx, pretty underwear that help further contain your period. Styles include hip-huggers, hi-waist, cheeky, thongs and more. Created by sisters Radha and Miki Agrawal and friend Antonia Saint Dunbar, Thinx is suggested in addition to tampons or cups. An extra protection layer, Thinx’s inner lining is treated with an antimicrobial application of silver, which becomes embedded within the fibers and fights bacteria.

21ST CENTURY DESIGN

“Our image is simply a reflection of the women we exist to serve,” says Hayward, of Cora. No longer shy little girls, women deserve packaging that reflects who they are: confident, smart, beautiful, conscious, feminine and modern. Today’s new feminine care brands are attempting to push the boundaries through advertising with more edgy and compelling imagery. “I started FLEX with a mission to create a positive, engaging conversation,” Schulte says. “By making a product that’s not only made with superior technology but is also beautiful and aesthetically pleasing, we are helping to take the menstruation conversation mainstream.”



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Lauren Schulte, FLEX founder and CEO



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ADVANCING THE CONVERSATION

Sadly period stigma is a very real thing, particularly in developing countries. “The taboo of menstruation is a perpetuation of the patriarchy, and its dismantling is paramount of women’s equality and rights,” says Hayward, whose company Cora gives products to girls in developing countries for every monthly supply sold.

Kali partners with Girl Up to help girls understand that menstruation is healthy and natural. Lola launched its own program to improve access to feminine care in the U.S. and has donated more than 100,000 tampons through partnerships with Support the Girls, Distributing Dignity and Simply the Basics. Thinx donates funds to AFRIPads, a social business in Uganda that hires local women and trains them to sew and sell washable, reusable cloth pads, in turn creating entrepreneurs.

For every Ruby Cup sold, the company donates a cup to a schoolgirl in Africa. “The problem no one talks about is the millions of girls and women whose lives really do stop when they have their period because they are not allowed to participate in daily routines for cultural or religious reasons or they do not have access to products to manage their menstrual flow,” Arranz says. “This is what the conversation should be about, not so much about blue liquid and white hot pants.” Adds FLEX’s Schulte, “If we lived in a world where every woman lived unashamed of her own body, think of the collective mind space we’d free up for women to focus on solving the world’s most pressing problems.”

Did you know?

- ✿ In 2015, women spent \$3.1 billion on tampons, pads and sanitary panty liners, according to Euromonitor.
- ✿ In 2016, President Barack Obama was the first president to discuss menstruation when interviewed by YouTube star Ingrid Nilsen, who asked him why tampons and pads are taxed anywhere from 4 to 10 percent as luxury items in 40 states. His response: “I suspect it’s because men were making these laws when those taxes were passed.”
- ✿ *The Story of Menstruation* was released by Disney in 1946 for sex education classes and is rumored to be the first film to use the word vagina.
- ✿ Feminine care products are not food-stamp eligible.
- ✿ The FDA does not test tampons and relies on—not requires—manufacturers to report to them and disclose the ingredients in tampons and pads.
- ✿ The average woman throws away up to 300 pounds of tampons, pads and liners in her lifetime.
- ✿ New York recently passed legislation to eliminate the tampon tax.
- ✿ The average woman uses about 12,000 tampons in her lifetime.
- ✿ Dr. Earle Cleveland Haas of Denver invented the modern tampon and cardboard applicator in 1931.