Tampons

A Case Study in Controversy

Although women did not hesitate to use disposable sanitary napkins, many were not so confident that tampons were a good idea. Physicians were equally concerned during the ten years after tampons were introduced in 1936, and they studied and debated tampons' effects on health. Women and physicians alike were concerned about tampons' safety, efficacy, and sexual implications. Among interviewees, it was clear that these issues remained salient much longer for those outside the white, urban, well-educated middle class. Women who did not belong to this group at least recognized that they crossed social boundaries if they began using tampons, and some explained their decision not to use tampons in these terms. By the last decades of the century, young women interviewees almost all used tampons, their desire to instantiate modern bodies outweighing any persistent unease about tampons they might have acknowledged.

In the 1930s and 1940s, physicians debated the safety of tampons in major medical journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*), as well as local journals aimed at practitioners. A parallel debate took place in Great Britain, most evident in a long series of letters to the editors of the *British Medical Journal*. Physicians were sharply divided in their opinions about the safety of tampons. Previously, tampons had been medical devices, made of cotton, sometimes treated with medicine, that were "tamped" into bodily orifices to provide support or deliver medicine. Tampons were therefore not regarded as inherently dangerous, but using them to absorb menstrual blood meant that they were used significantly differently: first, they were used much more frequently, and second, they were controlled by the woman herself, rather than being prescribed by a doctor and managed by a nurse. Those who opposed tampons for menstrual management feared that frequent use would irritate the vagina and that women would introduce infection by not observing the same rules of hygiene as physicians and nurses. Detractors made this argument on the basis of princi-

ple, as well as some experiences with women who forgot to take out tampons at the end of a cycle and came to the doctor because they were concerned about an odor or discharge. Physicians expressed not only concern for women patients but also extreme distaste at having to remove long-forgotten tampons.

Physicians also worried about drainage of the menstrual blood. Through the early twentieth century, it was commonly believed that regular menstruation was necessary to rid the body of waste and that waste that was trapped inside the body would lead to illness. In the 1930s and 1940s, physicians who retained this concern translated it into a somewhat different language, seeing menstruation as equivalent to a wound. Physicians writing in the *Western Journal of Surgery* explained, "As an early surgical precept, we learned that whenever there is free serum, blood, or discharge from a wound or body cavity, free drainage is desired and much be encouraged."[1] Therefore, they argued, tampons were dangerous, potentially backing up the blood into the uterus, causing a great deal of harm.

Physicians who opposed tampon use generally argued from their own experience and intuitions, and from their understanding of basic medical principles. In contrast, physicians who were more favorably inclined toward tampon use, including several whose research was funded by tampon manufacturers, argued from experimental results rather than principles. They shared concerns about infection and blockage of flow but undertook research to find out whether or not tampons actually caused any of the problems they were speculated to cause. Not surprisingly, the research funded by manufacturers demonstrated little cause for concern; however, university-funded research gave the same results, which should have reassured medical journal readers that the chance of infection or blockage was not nearly as great as they feared.

An early study sponsored by the International Cellucotton Products Corporation (the subdivision of Kimberly-Clark which made Kotex and would soon market Fibs tampons) found some cause for concern, when it discovered that 18 out of 95 women experienced a gush of blood at some point on removing a tampon, indicating that the flow had been blocked rather than absorbed. The authors of the study concluded that this problem could be easily avoided by using smaller tampons and refraining from tampon use during the heaviest flow. As an additional caution, they recommended regular gynecological checkups for tampon users. This was the earliest of the experimental studies; its conclusion was cautious and acknowledged the common concerns from a physician's point of view. "Vaginal tamponage has been a medical procedure, and physicians have kept their patients under observation. Tampons are foreign bodies in the vagina. We do not know from experience how susceptible the vaginal mucosa may be to re-

peated irritation. When tampons are used regularly during the menstrual period, periodic examination of the vagina should be made to ascertain whether the mucosa remains normal."[2]

Later studies, done after tampons had been in common use for several years, displayed much more confidence that tampons were safe. A 1939 study concluded that not only did tampons appear safe, they seemed less likely than pads to introduce bacteria-laden material from the anus. Unlike in the 1938 study, the authors of this study did not think it was "best to exclude the subjective information obtained from questionnaires and from personal interviews" and noted that women who used tampons liked them a lot better than pads.[3] Findings in 1942 and 1943 studies confirmed these results, with greater numbers of women studied over longer periods of time.[4] Concerned doctors nevertheless continued to be cautious in their recommendations to their patients. In a 1942 survey of American and Canadian physicians conducted by two Kansas City physicians, almost 75 percent of the 211 who answered the survey were strongly opposed to tampon use, and, of the rest, about half approved of tampons only for limited use.[5] The same year, a new edition of a major gynecological textbook called tampons "a menace," and even the 1950 edition of the textbook opined that "Theoretically, they are harmful . . . Routine employment throughout menstruation cannot yet be accepted as innocuous."[6]

Even those who believed that tampon use was safe were not as persuaded that tampons were effective in managing menstrual flow. The research sponsored by International Cellucotton (Kimberly-Clark) showed that fewer than 10 percent of study participants could rely on tampons for complete protection during their periods, and 20 percent could not even rely on them during the last day or two of their periods.[7] These dismal success rates could be partially due to the types of tampons that were used. The study does not reveal the three brands that were tested, but one of them was almost certainly Kimberly-Clark's Fibs brand, which was about to appear on the market and which would be notorious for its inefficacy. Later studies, which used Tampax tampons exclusively, found that 90 to 95 percent of women studied could use tampons for their entire periods without having problems with leakage or blockage of the flow.[8] Presumably, the women who had success changed their tampons often; even with the higher absorbency of late-twentieth-century tampons, several interviewees found that they had to change them as often as every hour or two during their heaviest flow. It is possible that the efficacy of tampons seemingly improved not just because manufacturers improved their products or researchers chose to study the most efficacious

products but also because women learned that tampons required different management practices than pads.

The concerns of physicians and the women who rejected tampons extended beyond concerns about safety and efficacy. In the first decades after tampons were introduced, physicians and lay people debated whether or not it was appropriate for young, virginal girls and women to use tampons. The concern was twofold: first, that the tampon would break the hymen, and second, that its use would be sexually stimulating and invite promiscuity or autoeroticism.

Doctors' concerns about sexuality were apparent in the above-mentioned survey of American and Canadian physicians, in which almost 75 percent of respondents disapproved of tampon use. The authors of the survey emphasized that many of those surveyed agreed that virgins should not use tampons; they did not mention the hymen but noted that "the difficulty of application was stressed."[9] Further, tampons were objectionable because in virgins, the tampon "brings about pelvic consciousness and undue handling, [and] may cause eroticism and masturbation."[10] These physicians assumed a model of women's sexuality in which sexual pleasure and desire was focused around the vagina and heterosexual intercourse; the fear was that the tampon somehow imitated heterosexual intercourse too closely. According to these concerned physicians, tampons had the potential to awaken sexual interest in women who were not supposed to be sexually active and to inspire women who did not have access to "the real thing" to discover unacceptable masturbatory substitutes.

Robert Latou Dickinson, a prominent and controversial sex researcher in the 1930s and 1940s, propounded a somewhat different model of women's sexuality. Dickinson took on the charges that tampons threatened the hymen and promoted sexual awareness. First, he compared the tampon to the sanitary napkin, turning the Kansas City physicians' analysis on its head: "The vaginal response in coitus belongs to the orifice and to the muscular girdle, as my swab tests show. The erotic stimulus of the stationary interior guard should be, therefore, momentary and negligible as compared with that of the moving pressures of the external pad, on areas provided with remarkably different ratios of sensory nerve endings." Expanding on the sexual dangers of the sanitary napkin, he pointed explicitly to its contact with the clitoris, noting that the napkin "is responsible for rhythmic play of pressure against surfaces uniquely alert to erotic feeling . . . The timing of this combination of warmth, friction and pressure fits the peak of congestion of the external genitals for the monthly cycle. Thus an unavoidable focus of attention on the region is emphasized for four days."[11] Dickinson did not, in

this paper, challenge the assumption that sexual awareness in women, especially virgins, was a problem, but he did relocate sexual feeling away from the vagina and its assumed link to heterosexual intercourse. The traditional, acceptable method of menstrual management was shown to have been sexually stimulating young women all along, and the new method, which seemed so threatening, in fact removed unacceptable sexual stimulation, making it appropriate for middle-class girls.

Dickinson also addressed the issue of the hymen, detailing the measurements he had made of the opening allowed by the average virgin hymen, and showing graphically that tampons should fit easily into a virgin vagina and should not be difficult to insert or remove. He did not challenge the importance of maintaining an intact hymen but attempted to prove that tampons did not threaten this piece of virgin anatomy. Dickinson allowed the hymen to maintain its importance in conceptions of virginity but considered it a much heartier membrane, able to withstand significantly more poking and prodding, than the common wisdom of his time. He also advised that for those who found it difficult to insert a tampon, "a good educator is the douche."[12] Dickinson's conclusions, while perhaps not widely accepted, did reach a larger audience than just the physicians who subscribed to *JAMA*: *Consumer Reports* published a briefer version of Dickinson's *JAMA* paper, including his conclusions about the comparative sexual stimulation provided by pads and tampons and the finding that the average hymen could accommodate a tampon without breaking, while leaving out the detailed pictures of vaginal openings and tampon width. This publication marked a turning point in *Consumer Reports*' advice on tampons, which had previously warned against use by virgins.[13]

Tampax, meanwhile, from its first package inserts in 1936, insisted that only "in exceptional cases, very young girls may find it difficult to use Tampax properly. If there is doubt, consult your physician." By 1952, the package insert took on the issue directly, stating that "fully mature young women can use Tampax without impairing their virginity."[14] While Tampax educational materials insisted that virgins could use tampons without problem, materials produced by Kimberly-Clark, makers of Kotex and Fibs tampons, were more conservative. Their 1940 educational pamphlet *As One Girl to Another* told adolescent girls, "frankly, most authorities say young girls shouldn't use tampons without *first* consulting their doctors. The reason is this. In most girls, there's usually a membrane called the hymen which partly closes the entrance to the vagina—from which comes the menstrual flow. Therefore, Kotex sanitary napkins are more comfortable, and better suited to a young girl's needs, than tampons of any type." Of course, the

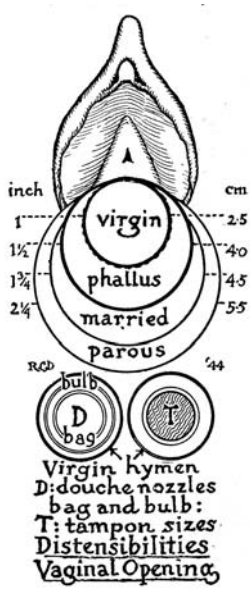

Fig. 4.—Caliber of distended hymen in virginal, married and parous woman, in relation to tampon and douche tube diameters.

Robert Latou Dickinson's illustration of vaginal and tampon width, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1945

pamphlet was quick to point out that if the doctor approved, Kimberly-Clark's Fibs tampons were the best choice.[15] By 1946, in their pamphlet *Very Personally Yours,* less clear objection was expressed, though it was still recommended that a girl consult a doctor before using tampons; Kimberly-Clark clearly hesitated to recommend tampons to young customers. In a corporate meeting in 1952, an executive pointed out, "We have always been very conservative. I think we should still be. It is said, perhaps with some justification, that tampons should not be used by young girls, those just beginning to menstruate, 12–14 years old. It may stimulate some erotic tendencies, or at least their mothers might think so."[16]

It was not until the 1960s, when middle-class sexual mores were shifting in many ways,[17] that Kimberly-Clark moved to the position that tampons were smaller than the opening of the hymen and therefore perfectly fine for virgins to use; the question of eroticism was simply ignored. Tampax had good reason to push the envelope on tampon use by unmarried women, especially because these were their most eager customers, but Kimberly-Clark was content to recommend Kotex over tampons for that portion of the population until the bulk of physicians and sex educators had clearly given their endorsement to tampons.

By the 1960s, health columnists in magazines aimed at teenagers assumed that unmarried girls would be using tampons. By 1973, they were explicitly discussing the issue, declaring that first, virginity is a matter of abstaining from sexual intercourse, not having an intact hymen, and second, tampons should not break an intact hymen. For those who continued to be concerned about the status of the hymen, columnists were willing to provide reassurance, but they emphasized the newly mainstream idea in sex education that the hymen was not an accurate indicator of virginity or lack thereof. Of course, just because this had become the common wisdom among sex educators about tampons and hymens did not mean that this belief had spread to the rest of the population. In the late 1990s, they continued to answer letters from readers asking questions such as, "Everyone keeps saying that if I really am still a virgin, then I shouldn't be able to use tampons. But I have no problem with them. Does that mean my hymen is broken and that I am no longer a virgin—even though I've never had intercourse?" The reply emphasized that virginity is based totally on experience with heterosexual intercourse. By the late 1990s, once it had been thoroughly established in the mainstream literature that the hymen did not really matter, it could be admitted, unlike in earlier writings, that "using a tampon might stretch or tear your hymen," but it was OK, because "it will not change your virginity status."[18]

Tampons inspired as much controversy and ambivalence in the lives of interviewees as in the published debates about them. Interviewees, too, worried about safety, efficacy, and sexual implications. Often, their hesitations and self-consciousness about tampons reflected and revealed class, race, regional, and cultural differences that had been otherwise effaced in the almost universal embrace of other aspects of modern menstrual management.

First, many women who were not white, college-educated, American-born city dwellers found that they had to cross boundaries of race, class and region before tampon use even seemed like a possibility. Most of the Chinese American women interviewees born before 1950 did not recall knowing about tampons until they arrived in the United States. Many of the older women in all of the groups interviewed reported that they began using tampons when they went to college or heard about them once they married or had children. Roberta Cummings Brown described her experience going to college in the city after growing up in rural Virginia.

> I went to college in the late fifties. And you had people from a lot of areas, so everybody's always pulling information about everything in those late night hours. Of facts of life, and things they had done, and things they wished they had done. And so the tampons, that would come up, how they were easier and safer. So that's how I, from then on, I did begin to use them.

Margaret Olsen, who grew up in a blue-collar household in the Boston suburbs, described how college friends, rather than her mother, introduced her to tampons. "I don't think she really was aware of them. It was kind of, pretty new, until college. Then different friends would say, 'I use them, I use them.' And I thought, 'Oh, if she can figure out how to use them, then I ought to be able to.' But I never really did until I was married."

While younger women were much more likely to have used tampons, especially before marriage, several of them found that they had to cross lines of class, race, or region before incorporating tampons into their menstrual management. Mimi Cummings Wood's daughter, Lisa, explained why she believed that during high school, most of her white friends used tampons but most of her African American friends did not. She thought it was

> not mostly about health. Mostly just about tradition. And I just would say the white families would be sort of more lenient, and sort of more, just more modern, if that makes sense. Instead of the black families . . . in most cases the grandmother's still in their period, because a lot of them have children younger. The grandmother's still in their period, mother's still in their period, they're on their period, and they all just use sanitary napkins, because that's what's in the house.

Lisa recalled how she started using tampons.

> I had this girlfriend who transferred in eighth grade, and she was from North Carolina, and she was a bad girl. I always remember she would talk about tampons . . . That's why I started using tampons, from Nicole Rivers . . . she was just like a big city girl. She went to concerts and all this stuff. And she had had sex before, and she used tampons . . . I thought she was really cool.

In Lisa's rural community, tampons were linked to the proliferating female sexuality associated with urban life; this was appealing to Lisa but appalling to many of the older women in her community.

Jennifer Kwan, who grew up in comfortable circumstances in urban California in the 1980s, attributed her tampon use to her immersion in white culture.

> I feel like most Asian women, the more traditional they are, tend to use pads. They don't insert things like a tampon. They don't like even like looking at [whispered] "down there." Or inserting things. So maybe that's why my mom never used it herself, and she never told me about it. And it was just my friend, who was white—all of my friends back then were white—or [from the] dominant social culture.

It was necessary for many women that they go to college, have contact with urban American culture, have socially legitimated access to heterosexual intercourse, or accept the influence of white friends before tampons appeared as a viable technology to incorporate into their bodily practices.

Many interviewees were quite aware that tampons represented the epitome of "modern" bodily management, an ideal that originated in and reflected the values of the urban, educated, white middle class of the early twentieth century. In explaining why they did not use tampons, they often pointed to their own identities, and how they were different from that group. Liza O'Malley, born into a blue-collar Catholic family in a Boston suburb in the mid-1930s, knew about tampons as a teenager but did not use them. "I never knew anybody that did. I never knew anybody. None of my friends used them. Somewhere along the line I had in my head that that was for sophisticated people. More worldly people." Laura Hwang attributed her unwillingness to use tampons before she married to her embeddedness in Chinese culture. "Chinese people are very conservative. Before you are getting married, you won't touch things like, put anything in your body. Maybe that's the reason why I never, ever think about to use it [before marriage]."

Laura became an enthusiastic user of tampons once she immigrated to the United States and married. Liza tried them "because I was at the beach and I wanted to go swimming, and I also thought that meant that I was becoming sophisticated, becoming worldly." However, she felt that she failed miserably because she forgot to remove a tampon and a doctor discovered it during a gynecological exam. "When he pulled it out, the odor was so horrendous, and I was so mortified. I was so mortified." The second time she tried tampons, she had an allergic reaction that landed her in the hospital with a painful and embarrassing problem. After those incidents, she rejected tampon use and, to some degree, the "worldly" identity that tampons were useful in realizing. Not all women could or wanted to become "worldly," urban, college-educated, or culturally "white"

enough to use tampons or create for themselves this particular aspect of "modern" bodily identity.

Family debates about tampons were in some ways similar to those of the medical and educational experts but not a simple reflection of them. It was often clear to mothers and daughters that in rejecting her mother's concerns about tampon use, a daughter was implicitly distancing herself from the aspects of her family's culture that were not compatible with white, educated, urban, native-born middle-class identity. Furthermore, many older women agreed with the doctors surveyed in 1942 that tampon use threatened virgin status. Women of all generations who chose to use tampons as teenagers reported conflicts with their mothers or at least a reluctance to let on that they were using tampons. Samantha Fried fought with her mother over her tampon use as a sixteen-year-old, in the late 1940s.

> I said I was going to the beach, and she said, "Well, you can't go," and I said, "Yes, I am going. I'm going to use tampons, and that'll be fine." And "Oh, you can't use tampons!" "Yes, I can use a tampon. It's perfectly fine." She started asking a whole bunch of questions. I said, "Calm down, no, that's not the case." She assumed that, she was concerned that I was off having sex somewhere, and that the only way you could use a tampon was if the hymen was broken—well, she didn't even know there was such a thing. But if you used a tampon, you had ceased to be a virgin. That was the big thing. And it wasn't being a virgin as such, it was if you had sex, you could become pregnant. That was the focus . . . Using a tampon meant to her that I was out there doing things that were going to cause big problems!

For Samantha's mother, as for many of the more conservative physicians and sex educators at the time, it was not clear whether tampons were a problem because they broke the hymen themselves, or because they indicated a hymen broken by other means. Either way, though, they were a threat to virgin status and a signal of proliferating sexuality. This debate would be repeated between girls and their mothers through the end of the century, long after health and education "experts" agreed that tampon use did not impact virginity or affect sexuality, although the debate seemed to be less fraught and less frequent by the later decades. For much of the century, to some women and some physicians, while tampons were clearly "modern," they threatened to undermine both traditional and modern middle-class sexual mores.

Among those interviewed for this book, Chinese immigrants and their daughters reported particularly prominent and ongoing conflict over tampon use. Most

immigrants were not familiar with tampons until they arrived in the United States. Betty Li, daughter of a Chinese military officer and a homemaker who arrived in the late 1950s, had the impression that "when I first came, I'm not sure tampons were available. The pad was. Until later on." Even in the 1960s and 1970s, once tampons seemed commonplace and obvious to those born in the United States, many shared the experiences of Phoebe Yu, who explained,

> I know when I came to the United States, I went to the grocery store. I know that tampons were put together [on the shelves] with the Kotex, and I think it must be something. And that something, I wouldn't spend the money to buy a whole box, because I know I wouldn't use it, and then later on, I found in the office, in the restroom, or in public rest rooms, that you can buy both of them, and that's how I saw what it looks like.

By the 1980s on the Chinese mainland, tampons were advertised on television, but even for a young woman growing up in cosmopolitan Shanghai, they seemed foreign. Recent immigrant May Jue, born in the 1970s to an engineer and a high-tech administrator, described her surprise at seeing a tampon commercial as a young teen.

> In China we actually saw [an ad for] tampons, that thing that you stick inside. A woman was jumping up the board to swim, and she said, it's so comfortable that you can wear it to go to swim. I recall my sister, we all say it's a lie . . . Probably because we never experienced using that. Or the experience with having period each month is just so troublesome, we say, "It's impossible. It's a lie."

May continued to be skeptical about tampons after arriving in the United States. Women from China brought with them beliefs about health and virginity that made tampon use seem risky for anyone and a particularly bad idea for unmarried girls and women. This attitude was not universal; Laura Hwang, arriving from Taiwan as a young adult in the late 1960s, jumped to incorporate tampons into her bodily practices. "The first thing, I come to the United States, my friend teach me how to use tampon. And I say, 'Ooh, I like America, because of this!' [Laughter.]" However, Laura's enthusiasm was unusual, and even she waited until she married to use them. Betty Li, who also adopted regular tampon use, did not intend to use them before she married but got her period unexpectedly one day at work. "I was asking around, who has some supplies. And so [someone asked,] 'The tampon is ok?' I had never used it because I wasn't married then.

They said, 'It's ok, you know.' [Laughter.] It was a hilarious thing! I was in the bathroom; they were coaching me outside. [Lots of laughter.]"

Women who had health concerns explained them in various ways. Bonnie Kwan summed it up, speaking generally about Chinese health beliefs, as well as her individual concerns.

> We don't really like to use tampons because they think that they not be very clean and do a little bit damage on your body or something . . . I worry that germ, that I don't really want something in my body. And I think that I still have the feeling. Those are more in the blood so they have to be drained out of my body. And if you keep it inside, it's kind of a little bit toxic, no matter what.

Isabel Mao reflected, "To me I feel scary . . . I thought it's like a needle. Poke you. To me. I don't know. Right? You put something inside you. It's like a needle." Concerns about contamination, made prominent by Traditional Chinese Medicine beliefs about the necessity of draining menstrual blood and the vulnerability of the body during menstruation, may have been justified in terms of Western medicine as well, considering that in the 1970s, even relatively wealthy Taiwan was still a developing country with uneven levels of sanitation and manufacturing standards.

Women who had health concerns about tampons were dismayed when their American-born daughters wanted to use them and tried to convince them that tampons were unsafe. Jennifer Kwan's mother, Bonnie, explained carefully why her daughter should not have sex during menstruation or use tampons.

> She was saying, "Well, you know, it's probably not a good idea to have anything in your vagina (including a tampon) at the time you have your period, because the cervix is more open, to let the blood flow out, so germs and stuff can go in easier, so you probably don't want to be doing that" . . . [Also] she sees it as a plug of some sort, and that the menstrual blood is something, not so much waste, but it needs to flow out of your body, and so if you insert something inside it plugs it up and that's not healthy.

Sophia Lin was upset to discover tampons in her daughter's drawer because "What if it contaminated or something? I don't like. I heard something like that people got shock or something." The incidences of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) caused by new synthetic material in Rely brand and other tampons in the late 1970s seemed to Chinese immigrants to be only expected, and the TSS warning

labels on the backs of packages reinforced their concerns, based on Chinese health beliefs.

Some American-born daughters, in greater proportion than their peers who were not Chinese American, followed their mothers' way of thinking. Ginnie Wang felt, "If something is supposed to leave my body, I want it to leave my body as fast and carefree as possible. No pun intended on the brand. I don't like the idea of stopping something. I'm a big believer in flow." Heidi Xue did not use tampons until after college because her mother "had specifically mentioned toxic shock syndrome, over and over and over again. I don't know why, but it was her caution, and I never even tried because it seemed kind of scary. And of course, when you see a box of tampons, it's like in bright letters." Brenda Xiao remembered that she found out about tampons from girlfriends as a teenager "but just believed it was keeping the bad things in your body, like my mom had told me. And then, eventually, I just, I think just because of convenience, I didn't really care if it was keeping the bad things in my body." As she got older, her mother continued to warn her, telling her, "Don't use tampons because it interferes with fertility." Despite acknowledging her mother's concerns, Brenda continued to use them, feeling that the health risks did not outweigh the benefits of convenience.

Like Brenda, many Chinese American women born to immigrants chose to use tampons, and many of those were much less willing than Brenda to give credence to their mothers' health concerns. Angela Kong said that when she caught one of her daughters using tampons, she asked her daughter why. "Maybe because I never use that . . . I have certain reservations for using them. So, she say, 'Mother, it is very good, is very comfortable, is very easy. Nothing is in the way.' So I guess they use that." Isabel Mao was just as quickly dismissed by her daughter. "I try to tell her not to, see, because, to my knowledge, it's impossible, you put something inside. I said, 'Don't, don't, don't.' She laugh at me. She says, 'No, no, this is safe; this is safe.' So I guess that's safe. Because I think nowadays, the modern knowledge, they tell the schools, they teach the kids. [Laughter.]"

Isabel and others were concerned about their teenage daughters' health, but mothers also worried about preserving girls' virginity. Angela Kong felt, "When you are young, we never use that thing, to stick into your—what do you call it? Vagina? That's how I feel about it." Describing her daughter's use of tampons at age sixteen, she said, "She was always one of the black sheep in the family. She always would get ahead of everybody." Maggie Yi, born in the United States in the early 1970s, tried to explain what exactly her parents were thinking when they told her she could not use tampons.

> Only people who are not virgins use tampons. And it wasn't phrased to me sort of as if like you will physically be unable to unless you've had sex . . . Rather sort of that like if you were using them, sort of that would be like a sign that [you were having sex]. It wasn't a very logical kind of thing, but I totally associated married women at that point in my life and tampons.

Tampon use, to Maggie's parents, was a clear signifier. Talking about a friend at school, Maggie "mentioned that someone had a tampon or lent someone a tampon and they would be like, 'Oh, so so-and-so is using tampons!'" When she went to a Chinese summer school, she was surprised and amused to find out that many Chinese parents had similar beliefs. Maggie felt that her parents used health concerns to mask what really worried them about tampons. "They mentioned Toxic Shock Syndrome, but that clearly wasn't their concern. I mean, that *clearly* wasn't their concern. And only my mom mentioned it. My dad never did."

While immigrant parents were concerned, in the end, most were resigned to their daughters' adopting bodily practices and altering their anatomy in ways that were acceptable in the late twentieth-century United States, even if they would have been unacceptable in Taiwan or Hong Kong earlier in the century. Florence Wu mused, "By the time I knew she was using it, she was already using it, so I said, 'Well, I kind of blew it.' I kept wondering, 'Gee, I wonder if that affects your virginity.' But then, I don't know, they go on trips with their boyfriends. It's a whole different story." Laura Hwang enjoyed American body practices herself, so despite her hesitation about tampons' sexual implications, she nevertheless approved of their use by her daughter.

> I have some kind of mind, you are not married, don't use tampons. But she use anyway, so, I just don't say nothing. She had used already. Besides, it's more comfortable, so I don't say anything . . . You don't feel nothing, and keep you dry and clean. I think that's her choice. I think it's good choice. Nowadays, they don't really care if you're a virgin or not.

These women decided that perhaps an intact hymen just doesn't matter anymore.[19]

They also sometimes wondered if their daughters based their decisions on better information than they had had growing up. Angela Kong thought her daughter had picked up tampon use "from her friends. I'm pretty sure. You see, these days, the young people, they talk about it. It's nothing to hide, or anything like that. They tell each other." While she approved of her daughter's openness, she may not have had great respect for her source of information. Others, though,

like Isabel Mao, knew that their daughters had picked up "modern" information from school. Florence Wu asked in the course of her interview, "If you're a virgin, are you supposed to use that stuff? . . . But how deep is it inside? Because the tampon seems to go in pretty deep, doesn't it? . . . I thought, 'Why are all these girls—they are not married—why are they using it?' " She did not mean the questions rhetorically; she really was seeking information that she felt had not been available to her earlier. She again expressed her frustration with not having a good way to learn about menstruation herself as a teenager. "Here again, it's not having the knowledge. You're ignorant, you don't know, you have all these old wives' tales, all these scares, when you don't talk about it." Chinese American women were not always ready to abandon health concerns they learned in China, but they approved greatly of what they perceived to be the modern American way to giving young women lots of information. While most were not quite willing to withdraw their objections to tampons, both on the grounds of safety and on the grounds that they threatened virginity, they implied that life for their daughters in the United States might just be different enough from their own that their objections did not apply in the same way.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, as the sexual revolution flowered, tampon use became much more accepted among teenagers and young women. Among those interviewed for this book, many women born in the late 1930s through the 1950s gave tampons a try, even if they had hesitated to use them or had not even considered them as younger women. Many were under the impression that tampons were not marketed until the 1960s, an impression validated by a 1984 *Ladies' Home Journal* article, which listed decade-by-decade innovations in American society and technology, and placed Tampax in the 1960s.[20] In a sense, the article was correct because it was at that point that tampon use became widely accepted, even though tampons had actually already been advertised in the *Journal* for decades.

As more women tried tampons, they found that they not only had to cross boundaries of race, class, culture, and region to consider trying them in the first place but that they also had to adjust to the significantly different bodily practices tampons required. Those who liked tampons and those who did not noted the complications using tampons could involve. First was the difficulty of learning to use them. Peggy Woo recalled with humor the trials and tribulations of secretly

learning to use tampons in a locked bathroom, as her mother asked what exactly she was doing in there for so long.

> I remember doing the Kotex, the belt, you know, that whole, horrible thing. Really uncomfortable, not working all that great, for a while, and then really wanting to try tampons. And my mother saying, 'No, you really don't need to do that; those things aren't really very good for you,' and that was sort of all she said. And so I found myself sneaking out to buy these little boxes of tampons [laughter]. And reading, opening the little instruction booklet, which of course we all just, throw it away, you know, don't even look anymore, but it's like, this whole manual, mini-manual in a box, of how the physique of your body works, and, just, the whole thing. Just total trial and error. And there was plenty of error! [Laughter.] It's pretty funny, now that I think about it. I just could not get those things in right for the longest time.

It was perhaps especially difficult for the younger of these women, who were more likely to be trying them as teenagers, and therefore more likely to have to be surreptitious as they experimented with tampons.

It could take some experience for women who waited until they were older to use them, too, though, before tampon use really became routine. Deborah Leary did not use them in high school, in the early 1970s, since her mother did not have them around, her friends did not use them, and it did not occur to her to go buy them for herself as Peggy did. "As a teenager, [menstruation] was more of a nuisance than anything. I hated the pads . . . Not too many girls used tampons at that time. I just remember it being messy. And then once I hit college, I started using tampons and that was easier." It was not easier right away, though. "It was very uncomfortable, and the first time I'm sure I had it in wrong, totally wrong, because it hurt. But I got better. I didn't give up. [Laughter.]" Amy Rivers remembered rejecting Kotex and starting to use tampons "as soon as I got there [to college.] 'I'm not using these things anymore!' And I do remember using up almost half a pack trying to insert it. Trying to get it right." Laura Hwang heard about them from a friend who was also an immigrant from Taiwan and persisted in learning to use them despite the fact that

> the first time, I did not put it in the right place, and I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, it hurts!' And I could not take it out, I had to soak myself in the water to take it out. [Laughter.] And then I learned it. After I learned it, I loved

> it . . . If somebody says it's good, there must be some reason—you have to be open-minded. You know, if it hurts, that means you don't do right. You have to give yourself a chance, right?

Peggy, Deborah, Amy, and Laura all persisted in learning how to use tampons, despite sometimes substantial initial difficulties, and used them throughout their menstruating years.

Some other women, however, were not so enamored of them. The second problem with tampons was that even after learning to put them in, it took a lot of experience to learn how to judge whether a tampon was full of blood at a given time, and not everyone found their bodies to be especially predictable. Barbara Ricci summed up the problems she had with them. "It can be uncomfortable if you don't actually have a lot of flow. Because they're kind of dry when you take them out, and put them in. And then if you have a heavy flow, they're often not enough anyway. And it's just harder to tell what's happening—you can't see it." Florence Wu tried Rely tampons, the particularly absorbent brand linked to Toxic Shock Syndrome, when she was in her forties, and found the new material used in it exaggerated these problems for her. "I think the worst thing, the one time that I completely said, 'forget about it,' there was a particular tampon that bloated up really big. I can't remember—they took it off the market. I used that, and it was so painful to get out, and I said, 'Never again. I never want to use a tampon again.' " Margaret Olsen did not find tampons uncomfortable, but, she explained, "I was afraid it was going to leak out. I just couldn't believe that this was going to really work . . . I was constantly going in and checking, and checking. And then going out, and thinking, 'Is it working? Is it working?' And then I thought, 'The heck with this!' " Tampons were significantly harder to monitor than Kotex and, for those who had not taken the time and effort to develop the requisite managerial skills, could cause their own kind of discomfort and risk of embarrassment.

A third new difficulty that tampons introduced was the possibility of a woman forgetting one at the end of her period and leaving it in, or believing she had taken one out and inserting a second. Barbara Ricci remembered that she once had a problem with

> a tampon. In college. Kind of a funny, strange situation—I went out to a party or something, drank a little too much, thought I had pushed one in too far, couldn't get it out, and then I guess by the time I got home I was ok. I was worried about it, I called my mom, long distance, said, 'What do you do if . . . ' and she said, 'Well, you just *have* to get it out. You just reach

> up in there.' And my sister-in-law happened to be there, too, who was a nurse, and tried to tell me, 'You'll be able to get it; just reach up and find the string. Call back if it's really a problem, and you can go to a doctor.' I don't know if it's because I was a little inebriated or what, during part of the evening, but I must have at some point—basically, I never found it! [Hearty laughter.] I must have at some point gotten it out but totally forgot. This was a totally strange thing. So, it was something I never forgot. I still wonder where it went. But I had three kids, I know it's not still in there. [Laughter.]

While that episode was not enough to scare Barbara away from tampons, the difficulty of gauging which absorbency to use at a given time, and then the deaths from Toxic Shock Syndrome linked to Rely tampons in the 1980s, persuaded her that the benefits of tampon use did not outweigh the potential problems they created. More women coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s felt impelled to try tampons than did women from earlier generations, but they were also more likely to provide a thorough critique of tampons based on their experiences, and many made the choice to go back to Kotex.

Although a number of interviewees who grew up in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s decided not to use tampons themselves, unlike immigrant mothers, they generally did not object to their daughters using them, as long as they took the box label's recommended precautions for avoiding Toxic Shock Syndrome. They had made their own decisions about tampon use less out of health concerns than out of a belief that tampons were more trouble than they were worth, and if their daughters found them convenient, they had their mothers' blessings. When Margaret Olsen's daughters began using tampons as teenagers, she recalled, "I thought, 'That's great. I'm glad they got it.' [Laughter.] And in fact, I can remember one of them saying, 'Uck, I can't believe that you'd ever wear those pads, and have all junk just sitting there!' . . . And that's kind of always been their perspective. 'What a disgusting thing, ugh.' And it really is! [Laughter.]" Barbara Ricci saw their usefulness for particular situations. "I do think they're wonderful for people who exercise or swim. Or dance, or whatever, where you don't want a Kotex to be seen." Though Margaret and Barbara rejected tampon use themselves, they did not reject it in principle and encouraged their teenage daughters to use them.

This meant that their daughters, born in the last decades of the century, sometimes learned how to use tampons from their mothers. As a young teenager, Serena Joyce Ambrose saw her mother and older sister using tampons and

wanted to use them too. She asked her mother, and her mother showed her the directions, and explained what to do. "It was awkward at first, but ever since then I've preferred them over the pads." Joan Randolph's mother tried to teach Joan to use tampons when "one time I got my period and I had nothing, nothing in the house." It was evening, and they lived in a rural area, so getting to the store seemed difficult. Joan tried it but could not get the tampon in comfortably, so she gave up and used toilet paper instead. She guessed later that it had been difficult because her mother used super-size tampons; she finally did start using tampons when she was a little older and purchased the junior size, which she thought easier to use as a beginner. Joan's experience was a striking shift from that of most women of her mother's generation, who usually hid tampon use from their mothers, assuming it would be a potential source of conflict.

Young interviewees were likely to have begun using tampons during junior high or high school, not waiting until college or marriage as most of their mothers had. Taking for granted modern menstrual management, they had high expectations of the related technology. While they appreciated the recent innovations in pads, some still had complaints. Several explained their choice by describing sanitary napkins in terms that would have sounded familiar to Mary Hanson at the beginning of the century, when she described cloth napkins. Kim Chuang thought that learning to use o.b. tampons from her friend "was very a empowering feeling . . . It didn't feel like you were on your period. I loved it." In contrast, she described, "When you're wearing a pad, it feels like you're carrying this weight around. Especially because I used the really big ones—it's like you're wearing a diaper." April Chandler bought herself tampons and learned how to use them by reading the directions on the box, "because my mom just used the pads, and I didn't like those because they felt like diapers to me. [Laughter.]" Mary Hanson would have laughed at these young women who thought that late-twentieth-century, relatively thin, adhesive Kotex was like a diaper, but in fact, they did have similarities to contemporary diapers in the same way that the cloth pads Mary made for herself resembled the diapers used for babies for much of the century. Young women did not like the awkward, infantilizing feeling of menstrual pads any better than did Mary, and they also sought alternatives—for this generation, primarily tampons.

Young women also particularly complained about the physical sensations involved in using pads and chose tampons to avoid them. Echoing Margaret Olsen's daughters, Lisa Wood put it, "[Do] you find it more appealing to have this blood laying against you [laughter] or just contained in a little, small thing?" Kim Chuang complained, "When I'm wearing a pad, I'm constantly reminded. When

I'm on my period, I feel it coming out. The most disgusting feeling in the world. You just feel it dripping out." Young women not only expected to be able to avoid the sight and smell of blood, and the awkward feeling of wearing a thick pad, they expected to be able to avoid the feeling of contact with menstrual blood.

Besides issues of sensation and comfort, many began using tampons because they wanted to swim or play sports during their periods. By this generation, few women thought they should refrain from activities during menstruation out of health concerns, though many felt uneasy about using tampons at first or had mothers who had concerns about virginity. Brenda Xiao explained why she finally overruled her mother's objections and started using tampons.

> She'd always make me wear a pantyliner when I was swimming, and then one time, it came up. [Laughter] In the pool. I've had terrible menstrual experiences, now that I think about it. So it's floating on the surface of the pool, and we were swimming with a bunch of friends, and the guys were like, "Ew, ew, whose is that? Whose is that?" So I totally shut up. I'm like, "Not mine!" And I think after that I started using [tampons] for swimming. And then eventually it just moved into [using them] for everything.

For young women who thought they should be able to do all their normal activities during their periods, correct technology was crucial to avoiding embarrassment.

Of the young interviewees, Chinese Americans were the most likely to avoid tampon use. However, there were a few young women from all groups who chose not to use them. Young white women often shared Chinese Americans' concerns about TSS. Traci Anderson avoided tampons out of concern about TSS for a number of years and then simply decided that pads worked well enough that she did not need tampons. Rose Mitchell avoided tampons for years because "I have a tendency to take rare possibilities and think it's going to happen to me. So the main reason why I was afraid to use tampons was I'd heard about TSS. And was convinced that if I tried it, I'd get it, and I'd die. [Laughter.]"

Young women found that it was not necessarily easy to stick with a decision to avoid tampons. After high school, most young interviewees found themselves in communities where it seemed that everyone was using tampons. Their mothers learned in college that tampons were a reasonable possibility; this generation felt pressured to begin using them during college in order to be as discreet, efficient, and capable as their peers. Maggie Yi described, "I never actually had seen an unwrapped tampon until college. My roommates all used them, and they thought it was hysterical that I hadn't. I remember that." Even in high school,

Rose Mitchell was extremely self-conscious about having her period, partly because "most of the girls that I knew at school [used tampons]—and I think that was part of the reason I was embarrassed about it, I didn't use tampons, I always used pads, and they were bulky, and obvious, and not as neat. So that's why I think I had kind of a tendency to try to hide it." When she got to college, "in the dorms, especially being on a floor with all women, you couldn't be private anymore. Everybody knew, pretty much, what products you used . . . So it was time for me to grow up. And because I was convinced that nobody else used [pads] but me." Rose was pleased with tampons once she got used to using them and felt less embarrassed about having her period once she felt less self-conscious about the technology she used to manage it.

Young women could bring a lot of friendly pressure to adopt particular technologies and practices to bear on their friends, since they were much more likely to be talking to each other about their menstrual practices than were women of earlier generations. Amanda Chen described,

> I have a friend from college who still, as of last summer, had not [used tampons]. All of her female friends were encouraging her to try it . . . All this coaching from all of her friends, and, "Oh, you've really got to do *this* or *that*" . . . The first couple times she was really unsuccessful, and I'm sure it was because she was nervous. Or she tried and would keep it in for fifteen minutes and be all uncomfortable and take it out. And so I remember getting an email at work, "I did it!" [Laughter.] I laughed so hard. I called her, I'm like, "Oh my God!" It was such an accomplishment for her.

Friends both enforced the necessity of adopting modern menstrual management practices and supported each other in efforts to do so.

Managing their menstrual flow with tampons, for this generation, also meant managing the risk of TSS. As noted above, some young women were very concerned about TSS and avoided tampons completely because they were afraid of getting it. The syndrome appeared in the news sporadically over the 1980s, first when a pattern of TSS linked to tampon use in women was discovered by epidemiologists, and then when TSS victims brought lawsuits against tampon manufacturers, and manufacturers and watchdog groups wrangled over whether and what kind of warning labels should appear on boxes.[21] In 1980, when TSS linked to tampons was first announced, women's tampon use dropped off sharply.[22] Tim Dai remembered that while he was in junior high school,

> during the mid-1980s, it seemed to be in the popular press for a little while. And I just remember learning about that and being kind of disturbed by that and being concerned for people and not really knowing what its general implications were. I think I was also under the strong impression at that time that my sister and my mother were both using pads instead of tampons and so I remember being kind of aware of that.

Many women waited to resume tampons use until it became clear that the epidemic of TSS seemed to be the result of a new, more absorbent material, present in particularly large amounts in Proctor and Gamble's super-absorbent Rely tampons, and Rely was taken off the market. Still, TSS and its link to tampons were not well understood, and while health specialists could recommend practices that they believed would significantly lower the risk of TSS, they could not give any guarantees.

Despite concerns, many young women thought about the risk as something that could be reasonably managed if they took appropriate precautions and carefully planned their use of tampons. They were more aware than their mothers of TSS and had considered it when they planned how to manage their periods. Carlen Joyce Thomas "had a little system. At night, I always wore a pad. During the day, I would pretty much wear a tampon." Amanda Chen also

> kind of went back and forth. I don't wear tampons at night . . . I worry a little bit sometimes now, because I feel like if I'm using a tampon that's too strong, for what little flow I have now [on the Pill], that it's worse . . . The minute I think it's more doable, just changing more often, I'll move to pantyliners . . . When I was on my regular flow, not on the Pill, I liked the Kotex, the plastic applicator ones. They're thicker, but somebody told me in high school that they're not that condensed cotton. The absorbent thing is not as condensed, which makes it somehow, you're less likely to get TSS.

Amanda and others were willing to spend significant energy to plan their use of menstrual products carefully, in order to have the convenience of tampons while minimizing the risks associated with them.

Young women were very conscious of TSS when they felt they had made mistakes in their menstrual management. Kim Chuang once forgot to take a tampon out at the end of her period and went to her gynecologist because she was concerned about a smelly discharge from her vagina. When he pulled out the tampon, she said, "I was so embarrassed! I was like, 'I can't believe that was in there for a month. I didn't feel anything for one month.' I was totally tripping out, I was

like, 'I could have died from Toxic Shock!' He's like, 'No, no—that's really rare, don't worry about it.' " Her memory of embarrassment came first, but her concerns about TSS were not far behind. Young women knew they took serious, if small, risks in using tampons. They managed risk as part of managing menstruation and urged this risk on their peers as well, because they believed wholeheartedly in the benefits of producing discreet, efficient, productive, capable bodies all month.

Young interviewees' almost universal acceptance of tampons, despite recognized risks, came at the end of a process of about fifty years of experts and lay women alike debating safety, efficacy, and sexual implications. These debates, public and private, revealed the origins of the modern period in the Progressive era's white, urban, well-educated middle class. Many interviewees felt a sense of unease, or at least self-consciousness, about using tampons based on how their own identities differed from these social characteristics. The nature of concerns about tampons, and the social boundaries they revealed, were particularly evident in conflicts between mothers and daughters over tampon use. By the end of the century, however, even a persistent self-consciousness about social identity and tampon use did not prevent young women from contentedly using them as a key technology in modern menstrual management.