

Using continence products during your period



A guide for you, your parent, or carer

Should I use period protection be with a continence pad?

There is not much published on whether sanitary protection should be used for women and girls during their periods if they usually wear continence products due to urinary and/or faecal leakage.

Continence nurse specialists and other healthcare professionals usually recommend that this decision should be an individual choice for the person, or their carer, or family. If sanitary protection is needed with the continence product, then the usual advice is that it is only used on days when the menstrual flow is at its heaviest.

When making the decision about whether to use sanitary protection with a continence pad it may be helpful to understand how they both work and the differences between them.

How continence products work

Continence products are designed to absorb urine, which has the same consistency as water and to contain faeces. They consist of four main parts.

- A one-way top sheet (that sits next to the skin). This allows the urine to get into the core of the product but not to get back through to the skin and is one of the ways that the product keeps moisture 'locked away' from the skin.
- A core. This is the part in the middle. It consists of curly fibres, that draw the urine into the centre of the product. It also contains a super absorbent element. These are crystals that swell as they absorb the urine, but will continue to feel dry to touch. The core helps to keep moisture contained in the centre of the product, and therefore keeps the skin dry.
- An outer waterproof layer. This helps prevent leakage of moisture through to the clothes.

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- Leakage barriers at the edges. These are elastic that helps to push any urine back into the centre of the product and prevent leaks while the urine is being absorbed into the core.

Continence products also have odour protection, which neutralises the smell of urine.

How is period protection different from a continence product?

Sanitary protection is designed to absorb blood, which has a thicker consistency than urine. Many sanitary towels have perfume to mask odour, but this does not neutralise the smell that urine produces when it has been in contact with air for any length of time. Finally, not all sanitary protection has leakage barriers.

What will be provided by the NHS?

The NHS will provide an appropriate continence product for individuals who have been assessed as having urinary or faecal incontinence that cannot be improved or treated. They will not provide sanitary protection and they will not provide extra continence products for use during menstruation.

Making the decision to use period protection and continence products

- Sanitary protection is not designed to absorb urine and can prevent the continence product from absorbing urine effectively.
- Sanitary products usually have a waterproof backing. If used inside a continence product the urine will not be able to get into the core of the continence product as easily as it should. This will increase the likelihood of leaks and sore skin.
- Wearing a sanitary towel inside the continence product can reduce the breathability of both products. This can result in discomfort and may cause sore skin.
- If you do decide to use sanitary protection inside a continence product, make sure that it does not change the way the continence product fits. It is important to make sure that the continence product is kept close to the body with the usual 'cupping' in the groin and that the leakage barriers and leg elastics are correctly positioned (follow manufacturers guidelines on fitting the continence product). This will help to reduce the risk of leakage.

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- If using sanitary protection inside the continence product, the adhesive strip should be used to hold it firmly in place.
- If used, change sanitary protection regularly to help keep the person's skin clean and dry.
- Change the continence product at the same intervals as it would usually be changed. It does not need to be changed more often than it is on the days when the individual does not have a period: it should be changed when nearly full or soiled (follow the manufacturer's guidelines).

Further advice

Tampons or menstrual cups may be used with continence products. However, these may not suit everyone. They should only be used by women and girls who can insert and change them independently, or who are able to consent to having help with them.

It is acceptable to choose to use a continence product without any sanitary protection

For some women and girls hormonal medication to reduce or stop menstruation may be appropriate. The GP or other healthcare professional should be able to offer information about the choices available.

Further information

Find more information about bladder and bowel health in our information library at bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline](tel:01612144591) (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.