Use of "Super-plus" Tampons Discouraged

An Institute of Medicine committee issues warning, but tampon categories may confuse consumers

Women, especially adolescents, should avoid the use of high absorbency tampons to lessen their risk of developing toxic shock syndrome, an Institute of Medicine committee cautioned last week. The recommendation is the strongest and most explicit warning issued yet on tampon use.

In a new report that extensively reviews the scientific research on toxic shock, the panel also advised that women who have given birth should not wear tampons of any kind for 6 to 8 weeks after delivery and that women who have had toxic shock should not use tampons at all. It said that young women, 15 to 24 years old, appear more likely to develop toxic shock than older women.

The committee's recommendation that women, particularly young women, minimize their use of high absorbency tampons is likely to confuse many consumers. It is not clear from product labels which tampons are highly absorbent. According to the report, the major brands of tampons which have a "super-plus" category are ranked highly absorbent. But Playtex Super-plus and Super tampons have the same absorbency.

According to the comparative analysis, conducted by Michael Osterholm, the acting state epidemiologist at the Minnesota State Health Department, a tampon labeled regular is less absorbent than a super tampon made by the same manufacturer. But when one changes brands, the choice becomes much trickier. Playtex regular, for example, has the same absorbency as Johnson & Johnson's o.b. super, but has greater absorbency than a Tampax regular.

The committee said that it is still unclear why highly absorbent tampons are most closely associated with toxic shock. It concludes, however, that toxic shock "has been associated with all major tampon brands and styles." The report did hint that Rely tampons, which were withdrawn from the market in September 1980 by its manufacturer, Procter & Gamble Company, did pose more of a risk than other brands. The report said, "Although there were many potential biases that could have resulted in the finding of an increased relative risk for toxic shock syndrome associated with Rely tampons compared with other brands, the consistency of the data from several case-control studies conducted at varying times in several states suggests that this increased relative risk for Rely tampons was real."

When asked by reporters whether he could name a group of women who should use high absorbency tampons, committee chairman Sheldon M. Wolff replied, "I myself cannot." Wolff, chairman of the department of medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine said later that he has told his own 22-year-old daughter not to use high absorbency tampons.

However, members of the committee went out of their way to avoid the appearance of proposing reforms in current Food and Drug Administration regulations governing tampons. They did suggest that their recommendations might be included in a package insert in the tampon box, but Wolff said that the committee did not discuss whether high absorbency tampons should be withdrawn from the market.

The committee's recommendation met with general agreement with Kathryn Shands, one of the epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) who has studied toxic shock. Shands, however, questioned the committee's advice that postpartum women should refrain from using tampons for several weeks, a recommendation that was developed from CDC data that Shands helped to compile. The study reviewed several case reports of women who got toxic shock shortly after delivery and were using tampons. Based on that data, Shands said, "We would not have made that recommendation." "It's not bad advice, but it's not consistent with the data."

Wolff explained that the recommendation is "a very conservative approach." Said committee member Barbara Hulka, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "We don't know what the true incidence is in a true scientific sense, but why take any risk at all?"

The report does not present any new scientific data. It says that the cause of the disease still remains a mystery and that two toxins produced by *Staphylococcus aureus* may be related to the disease. Just how tampons are related to the presence of the bacteria or the toxins is unclear. It has not been demonstrated that tampons were contaminated with the bacteria when manufactured, the committee noted.

When Rely was taken off the market a year and a half ago, cases of toxic shock syndrome dropped from a peak of 135 cases in August 1980 to about 50 cases a month during 1981. The report says, "Uncertainty . . . remains about the true incidence rate in the United States during 1980 and 1981, and whether a marked decrease occurred after September 1980 when Rely brand tampons were no longer marketed." Although CDC reported a drop in the number of cases, the Minnesota state health department said that the incidence remained relatively constant.

Based on the Minnesota study, the report estimates that toxic shock syndrome on a national scale now develops in nine out of every 100,000 menstruating women. Three percent of the cases are fatal. What is perplexing to researchers is that 15 percent of toxic shock cases occur in men and nonmenstruating women. These cases were "usually associated with a localized *S. aureus* infection," the report says, but beyond that, clues to the cause of the disease in this group are even more obscure. Fewer than 50 cases among nonwhites and Hispanics have been reported to CDC which accounts for less than 2 percent of the cases involving menstruating women. The report speculates that the disease is still widely underreported because the symptoms manifest themselves in varying degrees. "The lack of a specific diagnostic test hinders reporting," the study says. CDC says that a definite case of toxic shock is characterized by a patient in shock with fever, rash, and peeling skin on the palms and soles.

What is clear about toxic shock, the committee said, is that 85 percent of the cases reported in 1981 were associated with menstruation and that 98 percent of these women were using tampons. Whether the risk of acquiring toxic shock is reduced if tampons are used alternately with sanitary napkins rather than continuously during menses is unknown, the report says. "It is likely that the number of cases would be markedly reduced in the absence of tampon use," it says.—MARJORIE SUN

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