

Period panties: usually safe?

For many women, menstrual lingerie is a welcome alternative to tampons and the like. Whether it is harmless to health depends on the ingredients.

High waist, briefs or body shorts – menstrual lingerie comes in all shapes and colours. In the crotch, the lingerie pieces have a multi-layered insert that absorbs the blood. Manufacturers point out the sustainability of these products. The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), on the other hand, draws attention to insufficient data and, thus, a lack of health assessments on some ingredients.

PENDING RISK ASSESSMENTS

Some manufacturers use biocides such as silver chloride or zinc pyrithione to prevent unpleasant odours or bacteria from multiplying. “However, it is known that biocidal active substances can lead to allergic reactions and affect the bacterial flora of the skin,” explains Dr Vera Ritz. She is in charge of the evaluation of biocides at the BfR. “As long as there is no evaluation of either the health risks or the efficacy of the various substances – especially after repeated washing – their use in panties should be viewed critically,” adds Suna Nicolai. She works at the BfR on the risk assessment of chemicals in textiles. At EU level, the extent to which biocides can affect health is assessed by the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA). For this purpose, a large number of studies are used to analyse whether biocides cause skin irritation, impair reproduction or have a carcinogenic effect, for example. The European Commission then decides whether, in what concentration, and for what purpose a substance may be used.

SPECIAL REGULATIONS FOR EXISTING ACTIVE SUBSTANCES

The European Biocide Regulation classifies many of the biocidal active substances currently on the market as existing active substances because they were already used before the year 2000. However, at that time there was no assessment. This is now being made up for by subjecting these existing active substances to an approval procedure for their use in various types of products. For example, a distinction is made as to whether biocides are used in menstrual lingerie to protect health or to inhibit odours, i.e. as antibacterial agents. They are tested for their efficacy, safety to health and harmlessness to the environment. As long as the approval procedures are ongoing, the substances may be used in period panties within the framework of national transitional regulations. Even during this time, manufacturers have the obligation to provide a safe and efficacious product. However, they do not have to submit documentation or tests to monitoring authorities to prove this.

Meanwhile, manufacturers are already advertising biocide-free period panties. Europe-wide biocide legislation also has the sustainable use of substances in mind. With the knowledge of resistance development, the question of alternatives is coming into focus. The more frequently and widely antimicrobial substances are used, the more resistant germs become. The substance then loses its efficacy. —