

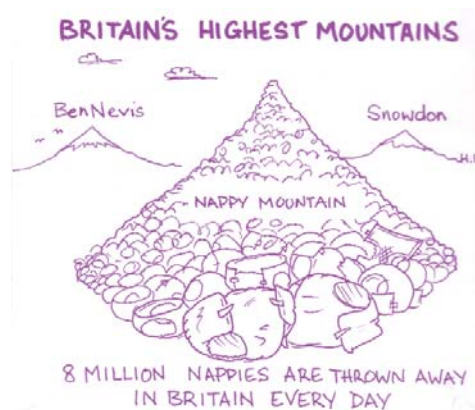


Women's  
Environmental  
Network

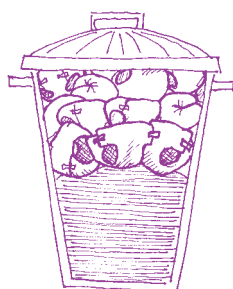
# briefings

## Nappies and the Environment

Babies need nappies, but which type should you choose? Disposables are a popular choice, but they use a lot of natural resources. Today's modern shaped, fitted nappies and almost universal access to a washing machine make cloth nappies an easy way to reduce waste. WEN works to raise awareness about the environmental impact of nappies and to ensure that parents and adults with incontinence have a fair choice.



- Disposables contain paper pulp, plastics, absorbent gel granules and chemical additives in the plastics and perfumes. All these chemicals and materials impact on the environment and there are concerns about possible health risks from some of them.
- Nearly 3 billion nappies are thrown away every year in the UK.\* That's a hefty 8 million a day.
- Most are tossed into the household dustbin.
- 90% of disposables end up in landfill sites. We do not know how long it takes for the plastics



- in disposable nappies to decompose but it could take hundreds of years.
- Dealing with nappy waste costs individual local authorities hundreds of thousands of pounds a year.
- The ecological 'footprint', or impact, of disposables is larger than that of washables.

Growing awareness of waste problems caused by disposables has led increasing numbers of parents to choose modern fitted or traditional cloth nappies. As people consider the real cost of disposables, there has been a general increase in the sales of washable nappies and the use of nappy washing services.

## What You Can Do

To reduce our use of natural resources, WEN encourages parents to use real nappies. Modern fitted designs and laundry services make cloth nappies much easier than many people think. But we acknowledge that they may sometimes be less practical than disposables - for instance, when travelling. Even if you only use real nappies some of the time, you are still reducing waste.

- Use real nappies wherever possible
- Use a nappy laundry service or wash your own at home
- Let your baby go bare as much as possible

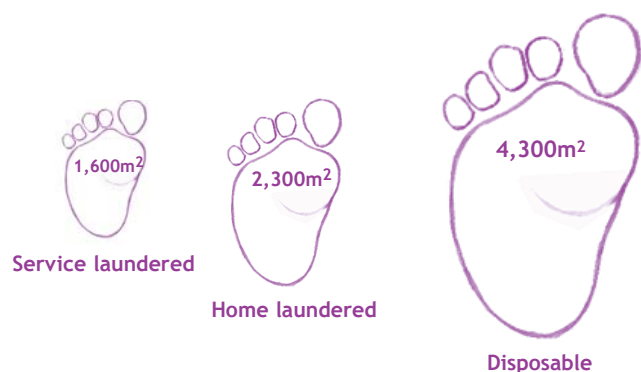
- Ask for advice if you need it. (see contacts on back page)
- Tell other parents about real nappies
- Help promote real nappies in your area
- Join Women's Environmental Network
- Give a real nappy leaflet or information pack to your local council/ midwife/ante-natal instructor/ incontinence advisor
- Health professionals and local councils can obtain our Real Nappy Resource Pack to help keep parents informed.

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## Pollution & energy use

The ecological 'footprint' of disposables is greater than that of washable nappies.



Footprints represent the land required for each baby each year from production to waste. (An average football pitch is 7,500m<sup>2</sup>).

Source: Best Foot Forward.

The footprints are calculated by measuring the energy and raw materials needed to make, transport, use and dispose of the different types of nappies and include the impact of washing.

Bleaching woodpulp to make the fluff pulp and paper for disposable nappies creates pollution. Chlorine bleaching creates toxic dioxins, but is used much less since WEN's 1989 campaign on the issue. Bleaching now uses different chemicals and dioxin levels are now as low as with totally chlorine-free bleaching.

Disposables contain several different kinds of plastic, made from non-renewable crude oil. More fossil fuel is used in the manufacturing processes for plastics and paper, and so they use energy at this stage. Renewable energy from wood is also used. Most plastics are not biodegradable, but even for truly biodegradable ones, landfill sites do not provide the right conditions. Even paper may persist for decades, but if it does break down, methane, a potent greenhouse gas, will be produced.

Paper pulp is a major constituent of the disposable. To supply most of the pulp used in Britain, ancient and diverse northern forests are being replaced with monoculture plantations, intensively managed with pesticides and fertilisers. Many animal species are already at risk due to forestry practices. Growing trees for paper adds to the greenhouse effect: mature trees absorb more carbon than farmed trees, and paper returns carbon dioxide and methane to the environment as it biodegrades.

## Reducing waste

The real nappy campaign and home composting have been chosen to lead the government's new waste reduction strategy with a target to convert an additional 155,000 households to real nappy use by April 2006\*.

Disposable nappies are not just wasteful and expensive for parents. Dealing with nappy waste costs individual local authorities hundreds of thousands of pounds a year (Bristol City for example, spends £500,000 a year). So it's not surprising that real nappies now play an important part in local councils' waste strategies. Many councils are working in partnership with hospitals, businesses and other local organisations to promote the waste saving benefits of real nappies. Some offer cash incentives to real nappy users while others are encouraging the establishment of local nappy laundries. For details of working partnerships visit: [www.wen.org.uk/nappypartnerships](http://www.wen.org.uk/nappypartnerships)

Councils have powers to prevent waste under the Waste Minimisation Act 1998, initiated by WEN. Encouraging greater real nappy use will help meet waste reduction targets.

\* *Waste and Resources Action Programme's (WRAP) waste minimisation programme* [www.wrap.org.uk](http://www.wrap.org.uk).

## Some health concerns

Most disposables contain a layer of super-absorbent gel in the fluff pulp. This draws up moisture away from the baby's skin. This gel is claimed to be non-toxic and has been approved by the American Food & Drug Administration. However, we are not aware of independent UK or European tests on the gels or studies into the effects of extreme dryness on babies' thin skin and genitalia.

Recent research suggests that disposables keep baby's testicles at higher than normal temperatures, which might pose a risk to their future fertility.\*

### Hormone disruptor

Traces of TBT (tributyl tin), a highly toxic chemical known to disrupt sex hormones and interfere with the human immune system, may contaminate certain types of plastic during manufacture. WEN has alerted all nappy companies to the dangers of TBT and has asked them to ensure that their products are TBT free. For this and a number of other environmental considerations we advise parents to avoid all products made of PVC.

\* *May 2000 Archives of Disease in Childhood, Scrotal temperature is increased in disposable plastic-lined nappies by CJ Partsch, M Aukamp and WG Sippell.*

## Laundries

Laundry services supply, deliver, collect and launder - no pins, plastic pants, sluicing or rinsing. Just use a nappy and place it in the bin they supply and collect each week. The nappies are washed to thermal disinfection standards used by hospital laundries, and carefully rinsed to protect your baby's tender bottom. Washing services help reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. After the nappies' useful life, they are sold as rags to all sorts of industries.



## Nappy rash

The type of nappy used is not a significant factor in the incidence of nappy rash\*. The most important factor in avoiding nappy rash is keeping the baby clean. Dirty nappies should be changed immediately and wet ones regularly, and bottoms washed at each change.

Fresh air is important too; let babies go bare as much as possible. Prolonged skin contact with soiled nappies causes nappy rash. Germs from the bowel have time to break down the urine and release ammonia, thus inflaming the skin. Nappy rash may also be a symptom of teething, or a reaction to new food that the baby's digestive system isn't ready for.

*\* Independent study by Professor Jean Golding, childcare expert at Bristol University, 1997*

### 'Environmentally friendly' disposables?

Washable nappies are the best choice. However if you are using disposables, brands marketed as 'environmentally friendly' may be a better option than other types. But claims of environmental friendliness can be misleading.

The nappies still end up in the bin, and as single-use items are a waste of resources. Even if disposables were 100% biodegradable, landfill does not provide the right conditions. When material does decompose in landfill it creates methane gas, a potent contributor to global warming. Composting and flushing disposable nappy waste is not practicable. Home composting of nappies is impractical due to the bulk and community composting of nappy waste has not been implemented.

### Economic benefits

Nappy laundries and nappy agents offer a locally based service generating local employment.

Nappy disposal costs a typical local authority £100,000 to £200,000 per year, and costs are rising. Washing nappies at home is the cheapest option, even taking into account the cost of washing powder, energy and depreciation of the washing machine. Cloth nappies vary greatly in price, flat nappies (terries, prefolds and wraparounds) being the cheapest option, and most can be used for several children, meaning even greater savings.

WEN has calculated that savings from using home laundered nappies for a single child could amount to £500. Payment plans make real nappies even easier to buy while second hand nappies are cheaper still.

## Nappy washing is easy!

Almost 90% of households have access to a washing machine so parents can establish a simple washing routine. Two to three loads a week is usually sufficient or nappies can just be added to the family's regular laundry loads.

There is no need to soak. Nappies can be stored dry, in a lidded bucket, until you have enough for a load. However, if you choose to soak wet and rinsed soiled nappies:

Fill a 9L bucket  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of water. Add 2-3 tbs white distilled vinegar, or 1tbs domestic borax\*, or 5 drops tea tree oil, or 1 tbs (non-chlorine alternative) sanitising powder\*. Mix to dissolve, change the solution regularly.

*\*Not for use on Velcro or waterproof fabrics.*

### Washing

A 60°C wash is sufficient for home laundry.

Domestic borax and sanitising powders are germicides so nappies may not need to be washed with detergent after soaking, just rinsed thoroughly. Boil washing is not necessary, is costly to your purse and the environment, and may reduce the life of the nappy.

### Drying

Sunshine will deodorise, sanitise and naturally bleach nappies, otherwise line dry indoors. Most nappies can be tumble-dried but this uses more energy.

### Useful tips

- A 20L plastic bin with secure lid may be more convenient, just double the solution.
- Perfumes, optical whiteners and other ingredients in ordinary washing detergents may cause skin irritation.
- Never use biological detergent or fabric conditioner.
- Some soaking and washing methods may not suit some nappies - if in doubt consult the distributor.



## Modern cloth nappies

**A wide variety of cloth nappies is now available, from simple terry-cotton squares to shaped all-in-ones that just Velcro on. The three basic types are, flat, shaped and all-in-ones.**

**Flat** - traditional terries, prefolds, muslins, and continental tie-on nappies. All cheap and versatile, they need some folding to fit the baby, and a waterproof cover, but they are very economical and quick drying. From around £2 per nappy. Even terries have changed - no pins required if you use a nifty little plastic device or special wraps.

**Shaped nappies** - requiring a waterproof cover. Shaped and fitted, with elasticated legs and waist, they generally have a neater fit than flat nappies and are even easier to put on. Most have Velcro fixings, some use poppers. They wash and dry easily. From around £4 each.

**All-in-ones** - supremely easy to use, as the shaped, fitted nappy with velcro or popper fastenings has a built-in waterproof cover. Not as durable as two part systems, and taking longer to dry, these are nonetheless the easiest cloth nappies to use, notably when out and about. From around £8 each.

**Covers** - forget nasty plastic pants that crack, chafe and leak. Most new-style covers are soft, durable, breathable and machine washable. Fabrics vary from waterproofed nylon, polyester or cotton to wool, and styles range through popper and Velcro fastening to pull-on, all of them allowing for quick and easy nappy changes.

## Useful contacts

### **UK Nappy Line - 01983 401959**

gives details of your local cloth nappy contacts whether you want to buy them to wash at home or to use a nappy laundry service.

### **2nd Hand Nappy Exchange**

**Women's Environmental Network**

**020 7481 9004** Thursdays and Fridays only.

[www.wen.org.uk](http://www.wen.org.uk) for online environmental and consumer information.

### **Best Foot Forward**

[www.bestfootforward.com](http://www.bestfootforward.com)

**T 01865 250818**

**E [mail@bestfootforward.com](mailto:mail@bestfootforward.com)**

For more about ecological footprints.

### **National Association of Nappy Services (NANS)**

**0121 693 4949, [www.changeanappy.co.uk](http://www.changeanappy.co.uk)**

A membership organisation with details of local laundry services.

### **Scottish Nappy Line - 01324 878 609**

offers advice and assistance on nappy networks, outlets and laundry services in your local area. Open Monday - Friday 10am to 4pm.

### **Sustainable Wales**

**41a John St, Porthcawl, Mid Glamorgan**

**CF36 3AP**

**T 01656 783405**

**[www.sustainablewales.org](http://www.sustainablewales.org)**

## Further reading

[www.wen.org.uk/nappies](http://www.wen.org.uk/nappies)

**Disposable nappies: a case study in waste prevention**, Ann Link, WEN April 2003

**Dumping the Diaper**, Sustainable Wales, 2000.

**Green Babies**, Dr Penny Stanway, Random Century, 1990.

**Women's Environmental Network** is a registered charity educating, informing and empowering women and men who care about the environment. It researches and campaigns on environmental and health issues from a female perspective.

**Individual membership** (women & men)

**£15 ordinary**

**£10 unwaged**

**£30 supporting**

**Affiliate membership** (organisations)

**£35-150 depending on size.**

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