

The Diaper Dilemma: Your Baby's Health

by Susan Crawford Beil

So cloth diapers are a good choice for your pocketbook and the planet. But what about your baby's health? Your baby's delicate skin? Is cloth really better, or are disposables going to take the best care of your baby's bum? Of course, we love cloth diapers and we think they are better. But there are many who believe that disposables are at least as healthy, if not healthier for a baby. Your child's pediatrician may even be someone who will tell you disposables are healthier (I know of many who say this, and some families who gave up on cloth because of this influence). Here is what you should consider in deciding which diaper is best for your baby:

1. Diaper Rash – both cloth and disposable users claim that the other diaper causes diaper rashes. And studies from both sides present “evidence” which states that their method is better for baby's skin. Research funded by disposable manufacturers compares disposables with cloth diapers used with vinyl – or “rubber” - pants. These old fashioned diaper covers do not breathe, and so they can contribute to diaper rash. The disposable makers have not compared their diapers with cloth diapers used with breathable covers made from wool, nylon, fleece, or polyester.

Diaper rashes are most often caused by things other than a diaper: antibiotics, illness, stress, diet, allergies. The reality is that if a diaper is going to cause a rash it is because it has been on a baby too long. Both cloth and disposables, if left on for more than 2-3 hours, will tend to make a baby's bottom a little raw looking. When urine – and poop, if you don't get to it in time – is in contact with skin for any length of time a rash may develop. Parents who use disposables tend to leave their babies in a diaper for long periods of time, and disposable manufacturers encourage parents to enjoy this luxury. Yet nearly 40% of all diaper complaints to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission involved rash and other skin irritations related to disposables – with not one similar complaint related to cloth. I know moms who brag that they only use 3 disposables a day – the same moms who seem always to battle a diaper rash on their babies' bums. Even though disposables have a gel to absorb the urine, the urine and the bacteria that grow when urine sits for too long are both still in contact with your child's skin. So, no matter what kind of diaper you use, you should change it frequently.

We believe cloth is better for rashes because cotton is naturally breathable. Furthermore, with cloth diapers it is easier to tell when they are wet, so you are apt to change your baby more frequently and keep rashes at bay.

In 1955, 100% of American babies wore COTTON DIAPERS. In 1991, only 10%
In 1955, 7.1% of American babies experienced DIAPER RASH. In 1991, 78%

2. Chemicals in diapers – many proponents of disposables will argue that laundry detergents used to wash cloth diapers can irritate a child's skin. If this is the case, the clothes you put on your baby will do the same thing and the answer is easy – switch detergents. Some argue that cloth diapers contain bacteria from urine and feces that do not get washed out adequately. This would be true only if diapers were not properly washed. Diaper services are famous for their excellent sanitizing methods, but home launderers can also sanitize their diapers. In our Easy Wash directions, we use a cold wash with laundry additives like baking soda (which creates a pH inhospitable to bacteria), and oxygen bleach (which has strong disinfecting abilities). We

use a second, hot water wash which also kills germs. Detergents themselves destroy bacteria, and hot dryers – or line-drying in the sun – also effectively kill bacteria. If you want extra assurance, you can add tea tree oil and/or GSE.

Disposable diapers are so wonderfully absorbent because they contain tiny beads of a gel substance called sodium polyacrylate. If you've used disposables, these are the little beads you may have found on your baby's bottom. Sodium polyacrylate can absorb 100 times its weight in water. Amazing, huh? Tampon manufacturers also loved sodium polyacrylate, until 1985 when it was removed from tampons because women who left their tampons in too long contracted "toxic shock syndrome" – suffering from fevers, rashes, and even death. No studies have been conducted on the long term effects of sodium polyacrylate on the health of small children, yet it stands to reason that the 2 1/2 years of exposure to this substance – often for long periods of time in the same diaper – may cause some serious troubles for our little ones.

In the ultra-absorbency diapers, sodium polyacrylate is so absorbent that it has been associated with bleeding and skin lacerations. That is, it can absorb more than just urine, drying baby's skin so severely that it cracks and bleeds.

3. Fertility for Baby Boys – A German study in 2000 found that disposable diapers raised the scrotal temperature of little boys by one degree, while cloth diapers had no effect on temperature. For boys, whose testicals are still developing, this may be a very serious concern. Increased scrotal temperature – even by one degree - is associated with infertility in men. Remember that the scrotum keeps testicles slightly cooler than the rest of the body, in order to produce a healthy and numerous level of sperm. The study also examined fertility rates among European men since 1975 – not long after disposables had become the popular choice for parents around the world. The researchers found the average sperm count of European men had decreased by 25%, and there had been a marked increase in the number of men being treated for infertility over that 25 year period. Further research is needed in this area to draw definite conclusions, but it is a concern one must consider.

4. Disposables and Asthma - In October, 1999 the Archives of Environmental Health reported a study in which laboratory mice were exposed to various brands of disposable and cotton diapers. Diapers were opened right from their packages and exposed to mice. The mice exposed to disposables suffered bronchoconstriction similar to that of an asthma attack. These mice also experienced eye, nose, and throat irritation.. In both small containment spaces and a large room, the emissions from one disposable were enough to elicit an asthma-like response in the mice.

Both chemicals from the fragrances added to disposables, as well as chemicals present from diaper manufacturing were emitted from the diapers. Bronchial irritants such as toluene, xylene, ethylbenzene, styrene, and isopropylbenzene were among the chemicals found in the diaper emissions. Cloth diapers were not found to cause respiratory problems among the lab mice, nor were unbleached, unscented "alternative" disposables.

5. Potty Training – Cloth diapered children average 24-30 months in diapers, while children in disposables average 36-42 months. Children in cloth know they are wet and therefore are generally more motivated to be potty trained. Disposable diapers keep babies and toddlers feeling

so “dry” that they often don’t mind being in diapers. It is becoming more and more common to see five and six year olds going to school in disposable pull-up pants because they are not fully potty trained! Disposable manufacturers are even starting to market disposable training pants that “feel wet.” A potty trained child develops self-confidence and healthy hygiene habits.

Your children's health and well-being will be at the forefront of your mind for the rest of your days. You will need to weigh out the factors we have presented and make the choice you feel is best for your baby's health.

Sources

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