

Reusable Feminine Hygiene Products



Executive Summary

Feminine hygiene products are considered luxury items, not necessities, and are not exempted from sales tax. The current tax in Missouri on such products is 4.2%, however, [HB 406](#), [HB 699](#), [HB 793](#), and [HB 899](#) propose to bring the tax down to 1.2%. Low-income menstruating individuals of all ages struggle to afford feminine hygiene products. Single-use disposable feminine hygiene products are selected by agencies for resource-poor environments and do not typically offer reusable products which may be more cost-effective long-term.

Highlights

- **Poverty disproportionately affects women and ethnic minorities.**
- Between 2017 and 2018, 183 female survey responses from St. Louis report **almost 50% of the women surveyed could not afford to buy both feminine hygiene products and food.**
- **While the initial cost of reusable feminine hygiene products is greater than disposable products, they reduce the costs associated with menstruation over time - including environmental and sustainability costs.**

Limitations

- Currently, there are no available reports from non-profit organizations or agencies (including schools and correction centers) involved in supplying feminine hygiene products about how distributing reusable period products may impact long-term costs. **Therefore, it is unknown the extent to which distributing reusable product can reduce overall costs associated with menstruation.**

Research Background

Poverty in Missouri

The poverty line is determined by the minimum level of income needed to secure basic necessities. Approximately 13% of Missourians earn below the federal poverty line; 5.7% of Missourians earn less than 50% of the federal poverty line.¹ Poverty disproportionately affects women and ethnic minorities.¹ In 2018, 14.3% of women had incomes below the poverty line compared to 11.0% of men.¹ Twenty-six percent of the African American population were living in poverty compared to 11% of the White population; the unemployment rate for African American women was 4.9% compared to 3.1% for White women.¹ Given that the African American population in Missouri is approximately 11%, the rate at which minoritized individuals experience poverty is much greater than that of White Missourians and makes up a disproportionate part of the population living in poverty.

Taxes on Feminine Hygiene Products

Feminine hygiene products are essential, sanitary health items. For tax purposes, feminine hygiene products are considered luxury items, not essentials, and are not exempted from sales

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tax. In some states, these products can be taxed at 10% or higher. Legislation concerning feminine hygiene product affordability, including taxation, and availability, has been introduced at the federal level, but it has not been passed. As of 2020, five states (AK, DE, MT, NH, and OR) have no sales tax; thirteen states (CA, CT, FL, IL, MA, MD MN, NJ, NV, NY, OH, PA, RI) and Washington, D.C., exempt feminine hygiene products from sales tax.² Economic research shows that tax breaks reduce the cost and improve affordability on such products for low-income individuals.³ The current tax rate in Missouri on such products is 4.2%, however, current legislation proposes to bring the tax down to 1.2%, which would match the tax rate charged for most foods. While the estimated savings per individual is relatively small, a reduction in tax would reduce total cost burden. Opponents against reductions in tax rates or exemptions suggest taxes on other items may need to increase to account for the tax revenue lost; in California, it was estimated that \$20 million in revenue was lost with such tax exemptions, however, this can vary by state depending on population and number of people who purchase these products.⁴

Access to Feminine Products

One study quantitatively assessed access to feminine hygiene products in **St. Louis, Missouri** between 2017 and 2018.⁵ In an analysis of 183 female survey responses from 10 non-profit organizations that serve low-income women, **64% of women were unable to afford feminine hygiene products and 21% of women experienced this monthly.**⁴ In these instances, many women had to use alternative absorbent materials such as cloth, rags, tissue/toilet paper, or infant diapers.⁵ Approximately 28% of the women included in the survey had either full-time or part-time employment with more than 33% missing work due to menstruation.⁵ Almost 50% of the women surveyed could not afford to buy both feminine hygiene products and food.⁵ **Regardless of age, women experienced a lack of money to purchase feminine hygiene products.**⁵ Age, employment, and education demographics were provided, however, and inequities by race were not described. It is unknown whether access to feminine products differs across other areas of the state. Although school-aged girls were not a part of this study, lack of products may force girls to miss school.⁶ In Missouri, current legislative efforts seek to increase access to feminine hygiene products in prisons ([HB 318](#)) and schools ([HB 653](#), [HB 654](#)).

Reusable Feminine Hygiene Products

The average menstruating individual spends roughly \$10 per month (\$120 per year) on disposable feminine hygiene products like tampons, liners, and pads. Reusable feminine hygiene products include reusable menstrual pads, silicone menstrual cups, discs, sea sponges, and menstrual underwear. In a review of female menstrual cup use, 73% of study participants from 15 studies (13 in women and 2 in adolescent girls) prefer these products over disposable products.⁷ In an analysis of 2,012 survey responses about reusable feminine hygiene products, 59% of women use or have considered using reusable feminine hygiene products.⁸ Specifically, 17% of women have made the switch to reusable products; the average age range of these women were 25-34 years old. Twenty-three percent of women (average age: 18-24 years old) were considering changing to reusable products whereas 19% considered but decided against (average age: 35-44 years old).⁸ An important consideration with reusable products is leakage as this may

prohibit a menstruating individual from everyday life activities such as attending school or going to work. Seven studies have assessed leakage with reusable feminine hygiene products; 6 studies had 2 to 12% of participants report leakage, whereas, one study reported leakage from 31% of participants.⁷

The cost upfront associated with reusable products is much greater than that of disposable products. The prices range between \$7 and \$45 with the average price around \$23 to \$30; this may differ for reusable pads as costs will be dependent on number needed and absorbency.^{7,8} However, these products can reduce overall spending per year on disposable hygiene products because reusable products have a lifespan of 5 to 10 years. In addition to cost benefits, reusable products can reduce the environmental cost associated with the solid and hazardous waste generated from single-use products.⁹ In regards to reproductive health concerns, reports show that these products have minimal risks associated with infections when compared to disposable products; this finding may be attributable to the fact that reusable products do not contain harsh chemicals found in disposable feminine hygiene products.⁷ Currently, there are no available reports from non-profit organizations or agencies (including schools and correction centers) involved in supplying feminine hygiene products (e.g., Dignity Period) or agencies about how distributing reusable period products may impact long-term costs.

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