

Diapers

What is the most convenient and least expensive method of diapering? Are disposable diapers really bad for the environment? What are the advantages and disadvantages of cloth and disposable diapers? Often, one hears conflicting answers to these questions. Since the average child is diapered anywhere from 7000 to 10,000 times before being toilet trained, this is not just a trivial matter.

The disposable diaper revolution began in the United States in 1961 when Pampers were first introduced. There's no doubt that disposable diapers, which became a hit during the late 1970s and early 1980s, have become standard. It is estimated that 97 percent of all diaper changes are made using disposable diapers. This is up from 85 percent in 1990 and 57 percent in 1980, according to Kimberly-Clark.

Disposables have improved in recent years to fit better and fasten more securely. In fact, they are typically "tweaked" every six to eight months due to consumer demand and fierce competition between brands.

Some of the changes are just marketing ploys—like "his" and "her" diapers that were marketed in the past. Other changes have involved major improvements. In the mid-1980s, a superabsorbent material was added to the inner core of the disposable diaper. This material absorbs urine to form a

gel that will not release the moisture from the diaper back to the skin. Super absorbent

disposables keep skin dry, but it's important to check often to see if the baby needs changing. Since these diapers don't leak as readily, parents aren't alerted to change them as frequently.



However, cloth diapering today is not what it used to be. New choices of materials and high-tech fabrics cause an increasing number of parents to reconsider whether disposable diapers are the best choice for themselves, their infants, and the environment. Among cloth diapers, those that are made of layers of different fabrics work best, wicking the moisture away from baby's skin.

Pros and Cons

Health Issues. Disposable diaper advocates propose health advantages over their reusable counterparts. In particular, they claim that disposables offer better protection against diaper dermatitis (diaper rash), while also decreasing the potential spread of infection in day care settings.

One pediatrician states that occasionally a baby will develop dermatitis from the paper in disposable diapers, and the parents have no choice but to switch to cloth diapers. Another pediatrician states that disposable diapers' most important impact has been the decrease in the number of cases of diaper dermatitis. Yet others state that there is no medical reason to choose one type of diaper over another. They claim it is simply a matter of personal choice.

Environmental Issues. Disposable diapers aren't considered as much of an environmental problem as they were 10 years ago. Reusable diapers have comparable environmental impacts. Because hot water and strong detergents are used in washing and energy is used in drying, reusable diapers also deplete natural resources.

Economic Issues. Disposables cost about twice as much as cloth diapers. To save money when buying disposables, buy the smallest size your child can comfortably wear, in the largest package available.

It is estimated that the two-and-a-half-year cost of home-laundered diapers averages \$1,726; with diaper service the cost is about \$1,755, and disposables cost around \$2,340.

Important Features of Disposable Diapers

Experts say to look for the following when choosing a disposable diaper:

- *Avoid diapers with a tape fastener that tears the diaper when you undo it.* Many diapers now have velcro-like fasteners, which work well for adjusting them after

they've been put on the body.

- *Cloth-like material allows more airflow to the baby's skin and lowers the likelihood of rashes.* The layer closest to the baby's skin should be very smooth and soft. The inner lining should have wicking capability so the urine can pass quickly through. The urine then encounters a transfer layer that has been designed to move the urine away from the loaded area quickly so the entire absorbent core of the diaper is utilized for absorption. The outer layer, or cover, in the better grades of disposable diapers now feel like fabric—not plastic.
- *Look for elastic around the legs to prevent leaks.* Stretchable sides can also help to fit the diaper on babies of various sizes.

Cloth Diapers

Cloth diapers are far less expensive than the weekly purchase of disposables over a two to three year period. They fall into three basic categories:

- *Flat, prefolded, or contoured* diapers are the traditional diapers that have been available for the past 40+ years. *Flat diapers* are simple square or rectangular pieces of fabric made of birdseye or gauze cotton that are folded to suit the baby's size. They are pinned or clipped to keep them in place. *Prefolded diapers* have a few extra layers of fabric sewn into the center, making them more absorbent where it's most needed. *Contoured diapers* also have extra layers of fabric sewn to the center, but they are shaped like an hourglass. This diapering style requires the use of a waterproof cover over the cotton diaper to make the system waterproof.

- *Fitted diapers* are similar to the contoured style but add elastic to the leg and waist openings. These diapers close using snaps or hook-and-loop closures, which eliminate the need for pins. However, this diapering style also

requires the use of a waterproof cover over the cotton diaper to make the system waterproof.

- *All-in-one diapers* combine the fitted diaper with the outer waterproof cover into one product. These are the most convenient to use because the waterproof cover is attached to the diaper, making cloth diapering a one-step process.

Performance Standards

Ultimately, the consumer wants a diaper that:

- prevents leaks,
- keeps the baby dry,
- has no shifting of the inner absorbent core,
- has fasteners that can be opened and closed without loosening or coming undone, and
- is affordable.



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Prepared by Joan Chandler, Lamb County Extension Agent—Family and Consumer Sciences, Texas Cooperative Extension, November 2002.

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