

How Improper Disposal of Sanitary Waste Affects the Public Health

In many parts of the world, menstruation is still shrouded in stigma, and the conversation around menstrual hygiene rarely extends beyond pads and periods. But what happens after the pad is used? Where does it go? How is it disposed of? These questions might seem secondary, but the reality is that improper disposal of sanitary waste poses a serious threat to public health—and it's time we talk about it.

Used sanitary pads, tampons, and menstrual cups are classified as biomedical waste because they can carry blood-borne pathogens like Hepatitis B and HIV. When not disposed of properly, they become a direct risk to waste handlers, sanitation workers, and even the general public. In many places, these items are thrown out in open bins, flushed down toilets, or discarded in water bodies—all of which can lead to contamination and infection.

- **Sanitation workers:** Often without access to gloves or protective gear, many sanitation workers handle menstrual waste with their bare hands. This direct exposure increases their risk of infections.
- **Waste pickers:** In countries without formal waste segregation systems, informal waste pickers come into contact with used sanitary products while searching through garbage. The lack of safety measures puts their health in constant jeopardy.
- **Community members:** When menstrual waste ends up in open areas or water sources, it can spread bacteria and viruses to entire communities, particularly in areas without proper sanitation infrastructure.



While often overlooked, poor menstrual waste management also contributes to psychosocial stress and mental health challenges, especially among adolescent girls and women:

- Fear of disposal leading to shame or embarrassment
- Avoiding school or work due to lack of disposal options
- Stigma and bullying due to visible or odorous waste

This cycle of stress and social exclusion negatively impacts mental well-being and hinders gender equality in health access.

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