

SO, YOU'RE ...

So You're Curious About Period Panties?

I was, too. So I took them for a test drive.

By **Barbara Brody**, Writer



A few weeks ago I came home and noticed a small brown package on my doorstep. An avid online shopper, I did a mental happy dance as I wondered what "present" had arrived for me. And then I saw the return address label, and I started to panic.

That little package was from a company whose brand of period panties has been haunting my Facebook feed for months. The ads suggest that these skivvies can take the place of pads and tampons, a concept that both fascinated me and grossed me out. Every time an ad would pop up, I'd promptly read all the comments underneath it in a desperate attempt to figure out how the heck they actually worked. Finally, after much hesitation, I decided the only way to get the real scoop was to try them out for myself.

As my period approached, I started to have second thoughts: Was I really just going to bleed into a pair of underwear and cross my fingers? It seemed insane. Equally crazy was the fact that I was planning to write about my experience. Although I've been getting my period since I was 12 years old, I'm still someone who tends to bury menstrual supplies under a pile of other drug store purchases before heading to the register. Now everyone would know that—surprise!—I menstruate.

In an effort to shore up my courage and feel confident about the logistics, I requested a call with the company's "period management specialist," Dani.

What I thought would take 10 minutes turned into an hourlong therapy session in which we discussed our periods and the benefits (and limitations) of period underwear. By the end of our call, any qualms I had had (mostly) faded away.

Shortly before my period started, I also chatted with Dr. Tochi Iroku-Malize (<https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/find-a-doctor/family-medicine/dr-tochi-ifeoma-linda-iroku-malize-md-mp-11353228>), a Northwell Health family medicine specialist, to get her take. She explained that the technology varies between manufacturers of menstrual underwear, but the idea is generally the same: The gusset contains several types of absorbent material, at least some of which is also designed to be moisture-wicking and odor-fighting. It's kind of like having a super thin, reusable pad sewn into your underwear.

Several companies now sell menstrual underwear. Some brands have a liner that you can see, while others have it hidden under the top layer of fabric that touches your body. A few manufacturers offer a removable insert, though that was not the case for the product I tested; it was an all-in-one design. The actual materials also vary by brand (some won't disclose the fabric, calling this "proprietary" information).

"A few people I know, especially mothers of teens who are active in sports, say that menstrual underwear has been a game changer for them," because they no longer have to worry about leaks, Dr. Iroku-Malize told me. Can you use them alone? She says it's possible—but there are no guarantees. "Some people don't need anything else; others will need a tampon plus a pad. Bodies are different."

Dr. Iroku-Malize didn't have any major concerns about women experimenting with period underwear, aside from the usual caveat to keep an eye out for allergic reactions to the fabric. She didn't think that wearing them would increase the risks of yeast infections or UTIs, but noted that there hasn't been any research on these products so women ought to learn as much as they can about a particular brand before whipping out a credit card.

Whether or not these products turn out to make having your period easier, "This whole industry is opening up the conversation of menstrual hygiene management, educating girls and women about their options, and helping to break the taboo," she added. "Half the population is female! We should be having these conversations.

"It was settled: I was part of a movement, and I was as ready as I was ever going to be.

The test

The brand I chose to try sells several different styles, some of which make sense to me (the hip hugger, cotton brief, hi-waist, and boyshorts are all supposed to hold up to two tampons' worth of fluid) and others that mystified me. (A thong? Why?!) As with any new underwear, I washed mine before wearing them for the first time. The general care rules: Wear your period panties during your period, rinse them out in the sink or shower as soon as possible after taking them off, and then machine wash and line dry them the next time you do laundry. I had five pairs in hand, though according to Dani, some people start out with three pairs or even one or two, though that's not ideal for reasons that soon became very apparent to me.

Dani explained that the underwear can be used as backup to a tampon or menstrual cup to prevent leaks, or you can wear the underwear all by itself if your flow isn't too heavy or if you're OK with changing pairs throughout the day. Since I was hoping to use mine to replace other products rather than as a backup, I planned to carry an extra pair and a plastic bag with me, as Dani suggested.

My first day tends to be light to moderate, so I put on my first pair around 8am. I was in and out of the house and feeling a bit apprehensive, but there was no problem at all. It was nearly 7pm when I started to feel like I might need a change, but I knew I'd be awake for a few more hours, and I didn't want to dirty three pairs in a single day. So I rinsed them out, changed into the boyshorts, and put a pad on top. Right before bed, I took off the pad and slept all night ... and it was totally fine.

At this point I was impressed but not totally sold because my flow hadn't gotten super heavy yet. That was about to change. I decided to wear the underwear coupled with pads or tampons until about 6pm, then I ditched the other products and just went with the period panties until bedtime. I rinsed them, changed into a clean pair and wore them alone all night—on new white sheets (eek!). But there were no leaks.

Now into day three, I was feeling a bit bolder despite having a fairly heavy flow. Although I had initially planned to keep an extra pair and a plastic bag on hand, the idea of having to switch out underwear in the middle of the day (and carry around a used pair) suddenly seemed incredibly unappealing. I put on a clean pair and wore them for close to six hours, until I eventually had the sense that the underwear was approaching maximum capacity. (How you're supposed to know this still isn't totally clear to me, but I was definitely starting to feel a bit damp.) With bedtime hours away and no interest in changing two more times, I put on a clean pair along with a pad. Then I slept overnight in just the underwear, and it worked perfectly.

Once my flow started to lighten up in the days that followed, I was able to wear a single pair all day long with nothing else; I just changed into a new one before bed. By the end of the week (yes, my period lasts that long), I had definitely cut back dramatically on the amount of disposable menstrual products I was using, but I had also done an awful lot of extra laundry.

In the end, I wouldn't say that using this product is more convenient. It's not cheap, either: Each pair retails for around \$30–40. The main pro, for me, is comfort coupled with a little less waste clogging the landfills. I especially liked wearing them overnight. I still have no idea how they lasted all night—I usually put on my bulkiest pad before bed—but somehow they did.

Going forward, I don't see myself using these panties on my heaviest period days. The idea of having to change underwear (and rinse it out) once, twice or three times during the day doesn't seem worth it, and when I stretched the underwear as long as I could on a heavy flow day, I just didn't feel so fresh or confident. But I'm definitely planning to use them on light days at the beginning and end of my cycle; if I can go an entire day with just wearing one pair of special underwear, that's a win.

Next Steps and Useful Resources

Meet Dr. Tochi Iroku-Malize, MD, MPH (<https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/find-a-doctor/family-medicine/dr-tochi-ifeoma-linda-iroku-malize-md-mp-11353228>), family medicine specialist.

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