



# UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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## Question & Answers About Toxic Shock Syndrome

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a rare, but serious infection that usually develops in women only during or just after their menstrual period.

### What are the signs of TSS?

TSS usually begins with a sudden high fever, severe diarrhea, vomiting, muscle aches, weakness, and a rash that looks like sunburn. Sometimes these symptoms lead rapidly to shock. Shock occurs when the blood pressure drops very quickly, and shock can be fatal.

### What causes TSS?

TSS is caused by a poison—or toxin—produced by a kind of bacteria called staphylococcus aureus. Tampons play a role in causing the infection. Most of the women who have developed TSS used tampons.

Tampons made out of synthetic “super absorbent” fibers were introduced on the market about the same time that TSS started showing up in large numbers. These tampons may cause tiny tears in the vaginal wall through which bacteria can enter.

Another contributing factor is that the bacteria grow and multiply more rapidly when there is a blood soaked tampon in the vagina.

### How can I protect myself against TSS?

Your risk of TSS is almost entirely eliminated if you use sanitary pads instead of tampons.

Women who want to use tampons can take the following steps to reduce their chances of developing TSS:

- Don't use a tampon with super-absorbent fibers. Use a tampon made of cotton.
- Choose the least absorbent tampon that meets your needs.
- Change a tampon as soon as it is soaked, or at least every four hours.
- Alternate between tampons and napkins (eg., use a napkin at night while you are sleeping).
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water before inserting a tampon. Keep the area around the vagina and rectum clean.
- If you have had TSS, don't use tampons.
- Watch for danger signs during your period: fever, diarrhea, vomiting, headaches, muscle aches, and rash.
- If one or more of these danger signs occur, stop using tampons and see your health care provider at once.

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