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THE WOMAN-TO-WOMAN CONSUMER GUIDE TO  
THE BEST AND MOST EFFECTIVE PERSONAL PRODUCTS

PLUME



# Strictly Female

## AN EVALUATION OF BRAND-NAME HEALTH AND HYGIENE PRODUCTS FOR WOMEN

DOCUMENTED SCIENTIFIC EVALUATIONS AND COMPARISONS  
OF PRODUCTS RELATING TO MENSTRUATION • BIRTH CONTROL  
WEIGHT CONTROL • VAGINAL HYGIENE • VITAMINS & MINERALS  
PRESCRIPTION & NON-PRESCRIPTION DRUGS INCLUDING:

DOSAGES AND EFFECTIVENESS

RISKS AND BENEFITS

SIDE EFFECTS AND INTERACTIONS

GLOSSARY OF INGREDIENTS AND LABEL TERMS

EASY-TO-READ CHARTS

**CAROL ANN RINZLER**

FOREWORD BY MARCIA L. STORCH, M.D.

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**CAROL ANN RINZLER**

**FOREWORD BY  
MARCIAL L. STORCH, M.D.**



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Every woman owes it to herself to know exactly what she's buying and precisely what she's doing to her own body whenever she seeks the aid of commercial products.

# Strictly Female

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## AN EVALUATION OF BRAND-NAME HEALTH AND HYGIENE PRODUCTS FOR WOMEN

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROL ANN RINZLER is the author of many highly acclaimed books, including: *The Consumer's Brand-Name Guide to Household Products*; *Cosmetics: What the Ads Don't Tell You*; *The Dictionary of Medical Folklore*; *The Signet Book of Chocolate*; and *The Signet Book of Yogurt*. She is a member of the National Association of Science Writers.

“AN EXCELLENT GUIDE to those drugstore items the friendly ads insist are ‘Safe!’ or ‘New and Improved!’ From diet pills, vitamins, contraceptives, douches and tampons, this well-written source offers documented analyses and a glossary on drugs, labels and herbal remedies. Everything you wanted to ask your pharmacist but were afraid to pronounce.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“HIGHLY RECOMMENDED . . . A concise consumer guide filled with helpful, easy-to-use product charts, which list the products’ active ingredients, possible side effects, and dosage forms.”—*Library Journal*

#### NOTE TO THE READER

The ideas, procedures, and suggestions contained in this book are not intended as a substitute for consulting with your physician. All matters regarding your health require medical supervision.

In addition, the fact that some ingredients, drugs, and products are described as causing allergic reactions, irritations, or other side effects does not necessarily mean that these side effects will occur in every person who uses these products or every time these products are used. Please also note that many of the products mentioned in this book are registered trademarks.

**FOR THE WOMEN WHO MADE THIS BOOK POSSIBLE**

**Wilma Gottlieb, Carole Hall,  
Joanie Hitzig, Elaine Koster,  
Phyllis Skolnik, and Phyllis Westberg**

# Foreword

Twenty years ago when I began to advise women about their health, it was commonly believed that anything "over-the-counter" was safe. But two relatively recent developments have changed all that and made everyone—consumers and prescribers alike—more skeptical about health and hygiene products. One is the proliferation of available products and the other is our increasing sophistication about drugs and their side effects.

With so many products to choose from and with such high-powered marketing and advertising skills being used to sell them, we're more inclined to ask which products are most necessary and effective. And given our increasing understanding of the complex nature of drugs, it's not surprising that consumers have questions about how to use them safely.

In the past, our faith in drugs was strongly influenced by their tremendous success in medical practice. Drugs have been lifesaving to an astonishing degree! In my lifetime, the rate of maternal mortality in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states has dropped from 620 per 100,000 live births to less than 6. Prior to 1945, people died from rupture of the appendix—a thing virtually unheard of today. Respiratory disease, especially pneumococcal pneumonia, takes a small fraction of its death toll of forty years ago; and rheumatic heart disease and nephritis are nearly unknown in younger generations.

Many of these medical advances can be attributed to the development of a process that produced penicillin in great enough amounts to make it available for general use. And in the face of penicillin's remarkable effectiveness, most people swept caution aside. Drugs were definitely "in"—and that constant refrain, "Doctor, I need a shot of penicillin," was heard throughout the land. For most consumers, the idea that penicillin and other drugs might do harm as well as good came later.



Now it is no longer uncommon for the consumer to want to be able to evaluate a prescription or "over-the-counter" product. And today she can easily do so—provided she has an understanding of the major evaluation criteria and the necessary product information. This book provides both and brings to the subject a degree of clarity and rationality rarely seen in today's market of fads and fakery.

Of course, there is much that must be left to private interpretation, and that's as it should be. Many products, while seemingly not of therapeutic value, do the job for a particular individual without probable harm. If a product is pleasant and helpful, a woman may wish to continue its use despite its questionable effectiveness. Furthermore, some women may choose to use a product despite its hazards and limitations. The Pill, for instance, came on the market for contraceptive use at about the same time as our more cautious attitude toward drugs was becoming widespread. Nevertheless, the Pill was an instant success, and as the United States veers toward zero population growth, it remains the first choice of women for reversible contraception (more women are sterilized than are on the Pill).

I have been bombarded, especially during the past five years, with requests for information concerning the safety, usefulness, and cost effectiveness of various health and hygiene products. The questions are varied: what's the purpose of vitamin therapy; why didn't the diet pills work; how good is this or that douche or vaginal deodorant? After years of calling manufacturers to find out what their products contain, and after spending thousands of hours explaining the good and bad properties of ingredients, especially additives, I am pleased to find this information in one place.

Carol Ann Rinzler has set out the goods and the guidelines. It is with a great sense of welcome that I recommend this book.

—MARCIA L. STORCH, M.D.

Assistant Clinical Professor of Obstetrics  
and Gynecology of Columbia University  
College of Physicians and Surgeons.

# Introduction

Every time we walk into the drugstore, we face a dazzling array of products meant just for us. Yet because most of us are neither doctors nor chemists nor pharmacists, we often lack the medical or scientific expertise needed to make a really informed choice among all the tampons and menstrual pads and douches and sprays and spermicidal jellies, creams, and foams on the shelf. The upshot is that we usually end up reaching for one product or another just because we like the packaging or have been impressed by the advertising or even because we have been using it for years—without really knowing whether or not any other product might work better.

*Strictly Female* aims to change all that.

This is a woman's product guide designed to answer questions only women ask about products only women use. That means letting you know why some tampons are more protective than others, why some menstrual pads chafe while others do not, whether we really need special creams or ointments for "feminine itching," which over-the-counter contraceptives may offer some protection against sexually transmitted diseases, and why some douche powders or liquids list every ingredient on the package label while others list only one or two. It also means evaluating products such as diet pills, which are used by both men and women but primarily by women, and some other products such as condoms, which are used by men—with women.

Naturally, we will be talking about brand names here. In most cases, whenever you see a brand name, you will see the name of the company that makes the product right there, too, so that if you have a question about the product—or a complaint—you will know where to send your letter.

To evaluate these products, I have turned to doctors, to manufacturers, and to a number of respected scientific publications.

Where experts disagree, I have attempted to present both sides of the picture so that you can make your own choice as to who is right.

Not all the people who contributed to this women's book are female. Rubin Alspector, David Blum, and Alan Kaufman each contributed professional expertise that helped to make the book a reality. I am grateful to them and to the many people in business and government who were willing to take the time to answer my questions about products and procedures. I am grateful also to Drs. Robert Bernstein, Marcia Storch, and Peter Rosso, each of whom was kind enough to read a section of the manuscript. Although the conclusions in the book are mine, their comments and suggestions were invaluable.

And finally, my gratitude always to my husband, Perry Luntz, without whose intelligent, even-tempered support not a word of this book would have made it to paper.

—CAROL ANN RINZLER  
*June 1981*

# *Strictly Female*

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AN EVALUATION  
OF BRAND-NAME  
HEALTH AND HYGIENE  
PRODUCTS FOR WOMEN

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tection; more women use them than use tampons. Mechanically, pads are easier to use, and the self-stick pads—with one, two or three adhesive strips running along the bottom of the pad—are easier yet. Psychologically, pads offer the user the advantage of not having to touch her genitals or insert something into her vagina. But even such simple products as menstrual pads have drawbacks.<sup>3</sup> Pads may provide a pathway for an interchange of bacteria among the urinary, genital, and anal areas.<sup>4</sup> If the wearer has vaginitis, pads may catch the discharge and rub it against the external vaginal area, increasing irritation and discomfort. Finally, it is exceedingly difficult to keep menstrual pads smelling fresh, because menstrual fluid develops an odor when exposed to air. Powders used to deodorize pads may be irritating, and pads with a built-in deodorant or masking perfume may be allergenic as well as irritating. The only practical solution is to change the pad as frequently as necessary.

### ***How to Choose and Use an Effective Menstrual Pad\****

The perfect menstrual pad is best defined by listing what it does not do. It does not chafe, does not rub, does not leak, and does not show under your clothes. And finding the perfect one requires more than a quick glance at the packages on the drugstore shelf. Here are some guidelines to follow.

***Pick the Right Size*** Menstrual pads come in a variety of sizes, nicely designed to match the variety of rates of menstrual flow (menstrual flow is usually heaviest on the second or third day of your period).

***Pantyshields*** (CAREFREE, KOTEX LIGHT DAYS, NEW FREEDOM ANYDAY) are flat as a pancake. They are great as a precautionary measure on the days before your period starts, but they are not absorbent enough to be used with assurance as a backup for tampons on heavy days; they just cannot cope with a sudden, unexpected spurt.†

\* Menstrual pads are commonly described as sanitary napkins, but I think that is an offensive term, which seems to imply that the woman who uses them is *unsanitary*. I shall stick to "menstrual pads." This phrase is precise, descriptive, and nonjudgmental.

† Pantyshields work like a charm when you have a nonmenstrual discharge. They protect your underclothes from stains and are virtually invisible, even under the

**Minipads** (KOTEX DEODORANT MINIPADS, NEW FREEDOM, STAY-FREE, SURE & NATURAL MAXISHIELDS) are more absorbent pads, but still very flat. They work well as emergency backups for tampons. SURE & NATURAL, which contains superabsorbent fibers, is more absorbent than the other three brands.

**Maxipads** (KOTEX, NEW FREEDOM, STAYFREE) are full-size pads anchored by adhesive strips. STAYFREE comes in both regular and super sizes.

**Regular Tabbed Pads** (CONFIDETS, KOTEX, MODESS) which are designed to be anchored to a special elastic belt, are the grand-mamas of the category, the pads which those of us over thirty-five grew up on. All three brands come in regular and super sizes.

**Oversize Tabbed Pads** (KOTEX FEMS, KOTEX HOSPITAL/OVERNIGHT, MODESS HOSPITAL SIZE) are longer and wider than regular tabbed pads, but not thicker. They are designed to provide extra protection in front and in back, and while most of us are likely to use them as protection for the vaginal area after the delivery of a child, they are also very useful as overnight protection when menstrual flow is heavy.

**Pick a Comfortable Shape** Many of us dislike menstrual pads because they often chafe the sensitive skin on our upper thighs. This chafing is caused by a wide pad's being compressed to fit into the narrow space between our legs, and while it's unlikely that we can eliminate chafing entirely, we may be able to choose a pad that minimizes the discomfort.

Most pads are rectangles; they may have rounded or straight or slightly oval ends, but the sides are usually straight as an arrow. Three, however, are shaped differently and are significantly less irritating.

CAREFREE pantyshields are shaped like an hourglass, wide in front and back and narrow through the middle.

NEW FREEDOM maxipads are narrow (about half an inch narrower than KOTEX and STAYFREE maxipads) and in addition have tapering oval ends, which make them much less likely to rub in front and in back.

CONFIDETS is a tabbed pad of truly revolutionary design, the

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closest-fitting pair of pants in your closet. Pantyshields and all other self-stick pads cling to cotton underpants, especially when kept in place by the pressure of the body against the pants. But no one has yet come up with a pad that will stick to nylon pantyhose.



elongated triangle, wide at the front (but still half an inch narrower than KOTEX and MODESS) and narrowing down toward the back, which is only one inch wide.

The shape of the pad, or at least its construction, also has a bearing on how visible it may be under clothes. A bulky pad, particularly one that is bulky in front and in back, naturally shows more than a slender one would. In general, the bulk of a pad depends on its size. Oversize pads are bulkier than maxipads, which are bulkier than minipads, which are bulkier than pantyshields. But there is one pad whose innovative design makes it much less likely to be detected.

The KOTEX regular, tabbed pad is, overall, about three-quarters of an inch longer than comparable CONFIDETS and MODESS pads, but its thick, absorbent part is about an inch shorter than theirs and its front and back are flattened down so that its ends lie much closer against the body than the ends of the other two.

***Pick a Pad that Keeps You Dry*** Next to chafing, a feeling of dampness is probably the most annoying thing about wearing menstrual pads. Come to think of it, dampness may even edge out chafing for first place.

An effective menstrual pad solves this problem by pulling liquid in toward the center of the absorbent part so that the surface that touches the body stays relatively dry. If a pad doesn't do that, or if you don't change your pad before it becomes oversaturated, you may end up with a case of diaper rash, just like an infant left too long in a wet diaper.

Menstrual pads differ in how well they perform in this regard. All of them are absorbent, but some of them dry out much faster than others. In addition, the rate of menstrual flow also affects a pad's ability to stay dry on the surface, and since that is an individual thing, you will have to try a number of pads to see which performs best for you at specific times during your period.

***Pick the Pad that Protects Against Leaks*** Pads that are similar in size are generally equal in thickness. The single exception is CONFIDETS, which is almost twice as thick as KOTEX and MODESS.

What often makes the real difference in a pad's ability to protect against leaks is the design and placement of the plastic shield on the bottom. Every pad has a shield, but some are demonstrably more effective than others. For example: