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Clarification: This column reports that King County Wastewater Treatment Division advises against flushing Diapers down the toilet. In fact, it advises against flushing anything besides toilet paper and human waste down the toilet.

## EcoConsumer

# Disposables or cloth? Environment weighs heavily on diaper decisions

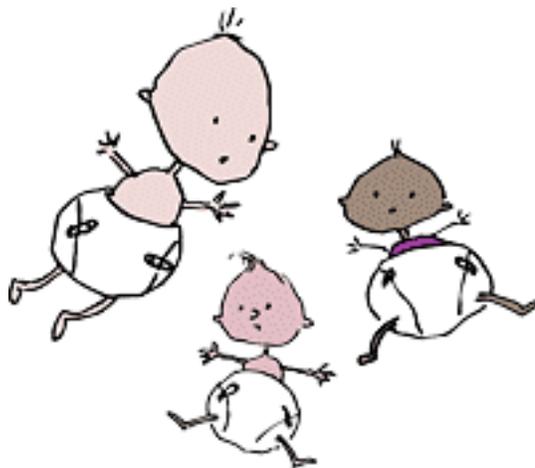
By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

The environmental movement has finally begun to have an impact on a very different kind of movement.

Although disposables still dominate, diapers have changed. New parents enjoy a wider range of options as they try to balance environmental impacts with other considerations such as cost, convenience and their baby's comfort. "Greener" diapers benefit all of us. In 2005, more than 54 million pounds of disposable diapers were buried in King County's Cedar Hills Landfill. That's nearly 3 percent of all waste — one of the largest percentages for any single type of product.

Production of disposable diapers takes an additional environmental toll, since they contain lots of petroleum-based plastic and chlorine-bleached wood pulp. Concerns also have been raised about diaper rash linked to disposables, and possible effects on babies from the super-absorbent gel used in disposables (although many studies indicate that the gel ingredient, sodium polyacrylate, is safe).



PAUL SCHMID / THE SEATTLE TIMES

### Diapering Options

**It was a draw**

The diaper changing table has been an environmental

## Cloth diapers

**Choices:** Diaper service or wash your own.

**What's new:** Reduced use of energy and bleach by Seattle's Baby Diaper Service. For diapers washed at home, dozens of new products and resources.

### Resources:

- **Baby Diaper Service:** [www.seattlediaper.com](http://www.seattlediaper.com)

- **Cloth (home washing) vs. disposables cost calculator:** [www.diaperpin.com/calculator/calculator.asp](http://www.diaperpin.com/calculator/calculator.asp)

- **Real Diaper Association:** [www.realdiaperassociation.org](http://www.realdiaperassociation.org)

- **Cloth diapers, types:** [www.cutoffcloth.com/article/differentsystems.asp](http://www.cutoffcloth.com/article/differentsystems.asp)

- **Cloth diapers, reviews:** [www.diaperpin.com/diapers/diaperpages.asp](http://www.diaperpin.com/diapers/diaperpages.asp)

- **British study:** [www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv/857406/1072214](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv/857406/1072214)

battleground for decades. Disposables garnered negative publicity in the 1980s, and cloth diaper services became a more attractive choice. But in the early '90s, studies showed that cloth diapers had their own environmental problems, such as the water and detergent used for washing, and the gasoline used by diaper-service delivery trucks.

It was left as a tossup. Without a clear environmental advantage, the diaper-service industry declined. Many major cities no longer have a cloth diaper service, and Seattle has only one. But with a multitude of innovative new products and resources available online, washing cloth diapers at home has become a more realistic choice for many parents.

In May 2005, an extensive study funded by the British federal government found no major differences in the environmental impacts from using disposables, washing cloth diapers at home or using a diaper service. A cloth-diaper advocacy group, the Real Diaper Association, claims this study had serious flaws.

According to Bruce Nordman, an energy and materials use researcher at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, the environmental benefits of cloth diapers largely depend on the user. If parents focus on reducing energy and water use when they use cloth diapers, they can probably have less of an environmental impact than if they use disposables.

### Better be quick

The debate has now expanded beyond "cloth vs. disposables." Other intriguing eco-friendly diapering methods have emerged, such as the provocative "elimination-communication" approach. With this system, parents become familiar with their baby's advance cues, such as a grunt or grimace, and then hold her over a training potty or toilet. Some parents ridicule this method, but others swear by it, and you can't argue with the waste reduction and cost savings. Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia and Kitsap County all have "DiaperFreeBaby" support groups.

As another green option, many area stores now offer chlorine-free diapers alongside regular disposables. A popular brand, Seventh Generation, contains a small amount of specialized

• **Reusables for incontinent adults:**

Search the Internet for "adult cloth diapers."

**Elimination Communication**

**Choices:** Varying approaches for going "diaper-free."

**What's new:** More parents and media taking it seriously.

**Resources:**

• **DiaperFreeBaby:** [www.diaperfreebaby.org](http://www.diaperfreebaby.org); click on "local groups" for support group info.

• **Natural Infant Hygiene:** [www.gentleparents.com/bauer.html](http://www.gentleparents.com/bauer.html)

**Disposables**

**Choices:** Standard disposables; chlorine-free, including Seventh Generation, TenderCare and Tushies; and other "green" brands such as MotherNature and Nature Boy & Girl.

**What's new:** Increased availability of chlorine-free.

chlorine, a fact noted in small print on its package. But these brown diapers have eliminated most chlorine, and are more eco-friendly than standard disposables.

The newest brand touting its green credentials, Portland-based gDiapers, markets them as "flushable." But King County Wastewater Treatment Division advises against flushing them down the toilet, since that may cause problems for home plumbing as well as sewer systems.

Diapers labeled as "biodegradable" offer no environmental advantage, because when they go to a modern, sealed landfill, they do not break down. Recycling of disposable diapers also sounds good in theory but doesn't make economic sense.

**Many factors affect cost**

For parents, comparing costs of diapering methods gets complicated. You can find standard, name-brand disposables for as little as 15 cents a diaper, if you buy several hundred at a time at a warehouse club. But disposables may also cost up to 43 cents apiece, depending on the size and type and where you buy them. Costs increase if you have a "Diaper Genie"-type disposal device.

For reusable cloth, Baby Diaper Service in Seattle charges \$16.45 per week for 70 diapers for newborns, which comes to 24 cents per diaper. Diaper-service customers may also save money on their garbage bills because they could sign up for a smaller garbage can.

Chlorine-free diapers (and "flushables") cost more than standard disposables. But check for deals. Seventh Generation chlorine-free diapers were found online, in bulk quantities, for only 19 cents a diaper.

In the end, parents make their diaper decisions based on emotion as well as information. But new parents agree that few environmental issues hit closer to home — they hold it in their hands, about eight times a day.

*The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers*

**Resources:**

• **Seventh Generation:** [www.seventhgeneration.com](http://www.seventhgeneration.com)

• **TenderCare:** [www.tendercarediapers.com](http://www.tendercarediapers.com)

• **Tushies:** [www.tushies.com](http://www.tushies.com)

• **MotherNature:** [www.mothenaturediapers.com](http://www.mothenaturediapers.com)

• **Nature Boy & Girl:** [www.natureboyandgirl.net/AboutUs.htm](http://www.natureboyandgirl.net/AboutUs.htm)

• **Chlorine-free diapers — reviews:** [www.modernwife.com/diapers.html](http://www.modernwife.com/diapers.html)

• **Saving money on standard disposables:** [www.thenewparentsguide.com/saving-money-on-diapers.htm](http://www.thenewparentsguide.com/saving-money-on-diapers.htm)

**Flushables**

**Choices:** gDiapers, Kushies or other flushable liners.

**What's new:** Flushing not recommended by King County because of risks of clogging pipes. Home composting a potential option for diapers soiled with liquid only.

*balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@metrokc.gov](mailto:tom.watson@metrokc.gov). Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com).*

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**Resources:**

- **gDiapers:** [www.gdiapers.com](http://www.gdiapers.com)

- **Kushies:** [www.kushies.com/Catalogue/diapers/diapers\\_accessories.html](http://www.kushies.com/Catalogue/diapers/diapers_accessories.html)

- **King County Wastewater:** [www.dnr.metrokc.gov/WTD/community/oldstuff.htm](http://www.dnr.metrokc.gov/WTD/community/oldstuff.htm)