NAPPIES

As a new parent, you want to make the best choices for you baby and their future. Choosing the right nappy for your baby can be tricky given the many options available on the market. There are factors to consider such as comfort, convenience, cost, performance and impact on the environment. With around 300,000 babies born in Australia every year, it is estimated around 800 million disposable nappies end up in landfills nationally every year. Each nappy can take hundreds of years to break down in landfill while producing methane, a potent greenhouse gas - leaving us dealing with the consequences long after a baby is toilet trained.

The problem

It is estimated that 15 million nappies go to Canberra's landfill each year. Disposable nappies pose problems for the environment in both their production and disposal. The water, energy and resources used to manufacture, transport and then landfill nappies and their contents is significant.

In 1993, disposable nappies accounted for 40 per cent of all nappy use in Australia. In the last few decades this figure has increased to 95 per cent . With the average baby changed six to eight times a day, this represents about 2500 nappies for each child per year. The average age of children being toilet trained has also increased over recent decades adding to the volume of nappies going to landfill.

Cloth nappies also have an impact on the environment due to the detergents, water and energy used to clean them but overall, they tend to use fewer resources and greatly reduce waste to landfill.

What are the options?

Disposable nappies

Disposable nappies are extremely convenient however after one use they are destined for landfill. Nappies incorrectly placed in the recycling bin also pose a health risk for staff working in Canberra's Materials Recovery Facility. Manufacturing disposable nappies is water and energy intensive and most nappies are made from synthetic fibres derived from crude oil.

Not all nappies are created equal, if you're swaying towards the convenience of disposables, but are concerned about environmental implications, consider options such as:

- nappies in recycled and/or recyclable packaging
- locally made nappies to reduce transport emissions
- nappies made from renewable and/or natural materials.

Compostable nappies

Compostable nappies look and feel like conventional disposables but are made from natural materials that will breakdown under the right conditions. They cannot be safely composted in home composting systems so like conventional disposables must be disposed of in of in landfill.

Currently there are no commercial composting facilities in Canberra that can process compostable nappies so while they may break down faster and with less plastic residues than a conventional disposable they will still produce methane as they break down.

Modern cloth nappies

Modern cloth nappies (MCNs) are fitted, washable, reusable nappies made from absorbent materials such as hemp, fleece, cotton and bamboo, with breathable polyurethane laminated fabric (PUL) or lanolised wool often used as a waterproof outer lining. They are shaped just like a disposable nappy to fit around your baby's thighs and belly, and most fasten using press studs or Velcro.

Makers of reusable nappies often recommend tipping solids in the toilet and then storing nappies in a bucket until washing. Biodegradable bamboo liners can also help reduce soiling. MCNs are often a more environmentally friendly option due to reduced volume of waste generated, but it does depend on how you use, wash and dry them. Although they have a higher upfront cost, in the long run they tend to be a cheaper option.

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Did you know...

- Each year around 300,000 babies are born in Australia and more than 6000 in the ACT Canberra's climate is particularly well suited to cloth nappies as they dry quickly

- It is estimated that approximately 800 million disposable nappies end up in Australian landfills each year

2500
disposables
=
$800 year

24
cloth nappies
<
$400 year

Cloth nappies

Traditional terry square nappies are a cost-effective way to round out your cloth nappy supply. They can be folded a number of ways, depending on the size of your baby and modern fasteners mean safety pins are a thing of the past. They aren't as absorbent as a MCN so will need a plastic pilcher or fleece cover to keep clothing dry.

Traditional terry nappies are a cheap and fast -drying reusable option.

Nappy service

A cloth nappy service offers the ultimate in convenience. A nappy service will supply and deliver professionally laundered MCN to your home, collecting and replacing used ones each week. This type of service can be expensive, but it allows you to try using cloth nappies before investing in cloth nappies of your own.

Simple tips and swaps to reduce waste

- Try a combination of reusable and disposable nappies Switch to a reusable swim nappy
- Flush solid waste rather than putting it in the bin Swap disposable baby wipes for washable cotton cloths
- Do not flush wipes or nappy liners, even if they are marketed as flushable or biodegradable
- Try biodegradable, phosphate-free detergents Wash full loads of nappies and line dry
- Avoid fabric softener
- Use a front-loading washing machine to use less water Buy second hand
- Buy locally made nappies when possible

Swim nappies are an easy swap that can be washed for reuse.

Conclusion

All nappies have an impact on our environment, and this varies depending on the type, how they are packaged, washed, dried and disposed of. Swapping to more sustainable options has been made easier by the growing range of readily available reusable nappies, many with convenient cleaning methods, absorbent liners and variety of designs.

Learn more...

VISIT
Cloth Nappy Display
The Canberra Environment Centre to explore different types of modern cloth nappies, accessories, inserts and kits before making a purchase.

JOIN
Canberra Cloth Bums offer information sessions, support and advocacy for cloth nappies.