

# Cloth Nappies - Making An Informed Choice

From Natural Parenting Magazine, Issue 3 - Winter, 2003

## The Cost of Disposable Nappies

Can you imagine anyone throwing a fifty-cent coin in the bin between five and seven times a day for the next three years? That is essentially what thousands of people are doing every day by using disposable nappies. Although most parents acknowledge that cloth nappies are a more economical alternative to disposables, few realise just how significant the savings really are. Even with the cost of water, electricity and washing powder, choosing cloth nappies will save you several thousand dollars over the time it takes your baby to toilet train. Not only that, but your baby is likely to toilet train on average six months earlier in cloth!

In February 2003, the average price for disposable nappies was \$0.47 per nappy, for the premium brand disposables, \$0.60 per nappy, and for the over 18kg and night time pull up styles the price ranged from \$1.00 - \$1.30 per nappy. On a per use basis this might not seem too expensive, but when you consider an average of seven nappy changes per day over three years, this works out to over \$3,500.00 for average priced brands, or over \$3,830.00 for the premium brand, not including pull-up styles. Using disposable baby wipes will add a further \$600.00 for the same time period, and another \$300.00 for the perfumed plastic nappy bags. That's \$3,500.00 to \$4,730.00 over three years, which is a small fortune in anyone's language, and doesn't include 5% of your garbage disposal fees charged by your local council.

\*Warringah Council Domestic Garbage Disposal survey December 1999 concluded Disposable nappies account for approximately 5% of the domestic garbage stream.

Unfortunately, the local council garbage disposal fee is something that most households in Australia are charged based on the total domestic garbage weight, 5% of which is estimated to be disposable nappies. Hopefully in the future Australian councils will follow the lead of local councils in the UK and offer financial incentives for parents who choose to use cloth nappies (laundry services or home laundering).

On the other hand, if you home launder your cloth nappies using seven nappies per day and washing a maximum of 24 nappies per load for a total of 121 washes per year, your washing costs including water, electricity and washing powder will range from around \$86.00 if you line dry, to \$114.00 if you tumble dry per year.

Total costs for washing cloth nappies over three years will be between \$258.00 and \$342.00 (mean cost \$300.00) plus the initial outlay for your nappies, which can be used for two or more children. When compared to \$3,500.00 to \$4,730.00 for disposable nappies, the savings are a huge \$3,140.00 to \$3,980.00 with greater savings for subsequent children as you have already paid for the cloth nappies.

The initial outlay for cloth nappies will vary considerably according to the type of cloth nappy you choose. Towelling or flannelette flat nappies are the most economical, ranging in price from \$18.00 to \$40.00 per dozen. Modern fitted nappies range greatly in price from under \$10.00 each up to \$20.00 each for nappies made from specialty fabrics or with an inbuilt waterproof layer. Fitted nappies are available in multiple sizes that provide a better fit but require additional sizes as your baby grows, or as single sized birth to toilet training nappies that are more economical but usually bulkier on newborns.

As a guide, your financial outlay for two dozen towelling nappies, cloth wipes and inexpensive nappy covers will be around \$60.00. For two dozen average priced, one size fitted nappies, cloth wipes and six quality nappy covers you can expect to pay between \$300.00 to \$450.00 (multi-sized nappies will cost more as you will need to purchase nappies in each additional size as your baby grows).

## What Do You Need To Get Started With Cloth?

Nappies: For full time cloth use: 18 to 36 nappies depending on wash frequency. This can be any combination of flats, shaped, fitted or All-In-One cloth nappies. From birth to about six weeks, your baby may need 8 to 16 changes per day. For the rest of the first year, 6 to 8 changes per day is normal and this will usually decrease to 6 or 7 changes (for optimal skin health) between toddler hood and toilet training.

- Nappy Covers (pilchers): Minimum of four in each size, 6 to 8 covers is optimal and means that they will last longer as they won't need to be washed and dried as frequently.
- Baby Wipes: One wipe per nappy is usually sufficient, but they are great to use to wipe hands and faces so any extras will be useful.
- Nappy Liners: One per nappy (one dozen would suffice if you don't use them all the time). Liners are not essential, but they do make cleaning up easier, help prevent staining and some liner fabrics keep baby drier which can prevent nappy rash.
- Nappy Buckets: One or two nappy buckets with lids. You only need two buckets if you want to keep wet nappies separate from the soiled ones.

## Nappy Rash

Nappy rash is a general term used to describe any red irritation that occurs in a baby's nappy area (although it can spread to other areas of the body). Only a few short decades ago when all babies wore cloth nappies, nappy rash was almost unheard of. Today, however it is estimated that over 70% of babies will experience nappy rash. Interestingly enough, parents of babies who wear cloth nappies rarely have to worry about nappy rash, possibly because they are more aware of when their baby needs to be changed.

### Nappy rash can be caused by:

- Not changing frequently enough (excessive contact with urine and faeces)
- Not drying properly after bathing
- Food reaction/allergy or change in diet
- Friction between the nappy and the skin
- Reaction to washing powder residue
- Inadequate air flow in plastic nappies that are left on too long.
- Yeast infection and other rare medical conditions that can cause recurrent or persistent nappy that do not respond to normal treatments will require medical treatment.

### Nappy rash can be avoided by:

- Changing more frequently (especially disposables). For optimum health, nappies should be changed as soon as they are wet or dirty. Some Doctors recommend changing every 2 hours, at least during the day, especially if there is a rash.
- Cleaning the whole nappy area with a damp cloth to remove urine/faeces at each change. Avoid perfume and alcohol-laden baby wipes.
- Allowing the baby to have nappy free time every day and ensuring the nappy area is completely dry before putting a clean nappy on.
- Not using excessive amounts of washing detergent, soap or nappy sanitizer and washing cloth nappies with an extra final rinse.
- Using a stay-dry nappy liner.

## Cloth Nappy Myths

### ***Myth 1. Using cloth nappies takes up time that I would rather spend with my baby***

The time difference between using cloth nappies and disposables really is negligible. It takes about twenty minutes to tip a bucket of nappies into the machine, throw them in the dryer or hang them on the line once or twice a week which is only a few minutes longer than it takes to walk each used disposable nappy out to your rubbish bin.

After the first week or two it will take you a matter of seconds to fold a nappy properly. If you are using modern fitted nappies there will be little difference compared to using a disposable. But even if it did take a little longer, it is valuable time that you are spending taking care of your baby's needs.

### ***Myth 2. Disposables are better at preventing nappy rash***

An unbiased study conducted at the University of Bristol\* proved that disposables give little protection against nappy rash. In addition, the 'Nappies and Nappy Rash' leaflet printed by the Health Dept. of WA indicates one of the causes of nappy rash is leaving disposable nappies on for a long time. This is a tendency many people using disposable nappies have as the nappy does not 'feel' wet, there are no

leaks and also to save money by using fewer nappies. \*(Br J Gen Pract 1997 Aug;47(421):493-7 Getting to the bottom of nappy rash. ALSPAC Survey Team. Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood. Philipp R, Hughes A, Golding J Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol. PMID: 9302788, UI: 97448380)

### ***Myth 3. Cloth Nappies use more water than disposables***

This statement is usually made in reference to the end use of disposable nappies and doesn't consider the manufacturing process. From start to finish, both types of nappies require water:

Cotton requires water to grow - from rain or irrigation. Disposable nappies are made from pine plantation pulp which requires a tremendous amount of groundwater for years compared to a cotton crop which is harvestable in less than a year. Both cloth and disposable nappy manufacture and transport depend on machinery that requires water. Product packaging manufacture also requires water usage, although with cloth nappies this is a once of occurrence.

Cloth nappies require water for cleaning – that can't be avoided. But if water use was really an issue in dealing with human waste then we would all be wearing disposable nappies instead of flushing toilets.

### ***Myth 4. Cloth nappies leak***

Nappies, whether cloth or disposable, are like a bucket - there is only so much liquid they can hold! You might be surprised to learn that disposable users do have leaky nappies, probably more frequently than experienced cloth nappy users.

Leaks can easily be avoided by using nappies that are absorbent enough for the baby's output, changing more frequently, ensuring that clothing is not tucked inside the nappy, using an adequate waterproof cover, and making sure that all of the nappy is covered by the waterproof cover.

### ***Myth 5. Cloth nappies need to be changed more frequently***

To avoid bacteria build up and nappy rash, your baby's nappy should be changed when it has been wet or soiled irrespective of whether you are using cloth or disposables. Disposable nappy advertising encourages parents to leave disposables on the baby for far longer than is healthy. Nappies, even cloth, can be left on all night if baby doesn't wake up. When using cloth nappies at night, just add a booster pad (or folded flannelette nappy for extra absorbency).

### ***Myth 6. I could injure my baby with nappy pins***

While many parents do still use pins, if you are really concerned - don't use them! Other devices are available to secure towelling nappies, or alternatively, a snug fitting nappy cover will hold a folded nappy in place quite sufficiently. Even easier are fitted nappies that come with Velcro fasteners or snaps.

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*Michelle Wrighton lives with husband and three children Ashleigh (7), Brittany (4) and Brandon (2) in Perth, WA. Disillusioned with the choices available in cloth nappies in Australia, Michelle started making fitted nappies for her youngest daughter in 1999. Determined to be home full time with her children, Cuddly-Bub Baby Products was started later the same year and Michelle is now proud to have babies all over the world wearing cloth nappies that she has designed and made. The information website ClothNappy.com was created early in 2003 to help and encourage other parents to choose re-useable cloth over disposable products*