

Puberty for Girls

Puberty is the time when a girl's body grows into a woman's body. Your body changes so that you will be able to have babies later in life.

How does puberty start?

Puberty starts with a change in your hormones. Hormones released from your brain cause your ovaries to make estrogen. The ovaries are part of your reproductive system. They make eggs and the female hormones estrogen and progesterone. Estrogen is the main hormone that starts the changes that happen when girls go through puberty.

When does puberty start?

Puberty in girls may start as early as age 7 or 8 years or as late as age 14 years. The first thing you will notice will be growth of your breasts. At first, there is just a little swelling below the nipple. This change means that estrogen in your body has started your development into a woman. It may take 4 or 5 years for your breasts to fully develop.

What happens to the rest of the body?

You will start having pubic hair after your breasts start to develop. You will also start having hair under your arms and more hair on your legs.

Your body will also start to change shape. Your hips will get wider and you will have body fat in new places on your body. Sometimes girls have trouble accepting their changing body shape--that's OK, but understand that it is important for your health and a normal part of growing up. Also, you will gain weight throughout adolescence. This is normal. If you are concerned about weight gain, talk with your healthcare provider about it.

Many changes take place inside your body, too. Because of changes in your vagina (the birth canal), you may start having a small amount of white discharge. This is normal. The vagina and uterus (where babies grow) will get bigger. Inside the uterus, blood vessels and tissue will start to develop, eventually leading to your first period and the start of your menstrual cycle.

Girls usually have a growth spurt 1 to 2 years after puberty starts and about 6 months before they start having periods. A growth spurt is when your body grows a lot in a short time. You will probably not grow much taller after you start having periods. However, your bones will keep getting stronger. This is why it is important to have 4 to 5 servings every day of foods that have lots of calcium. Calcium helps build strong bones, so you have less of a chance of having osteoporosis (weak bones) when you are older.

What is a menstrual cycle?

Girls are born with all of their eggs (about 2000 or so). The eggs are stored in the ovaries. Each month before you have a period, the ovaries release an egg. This is called ovulation. The egg travels through the fallopian tube into the uterus. Hormones make the lining of the uterus thicker to get the uterus ready for a baby in case the egg is fertilized by sperm from a man.

If a man's sperm does not fertilize the egg, the hormones change again and the uterus sheds the lining it prepared for a baby. When the uterus sheds its lining, blood flows out of your vagina. This is called menstrual flow, or your period.

After each period, the monthly menstrual cycle starts again.

What else should I know about periods?

For the first year or two, hormones make your uterus ready for a baby but your ovaries may not yet be releasing

eggs. During this time periods are usually irregular. You may have a period anywhere from once a month to 3 times a year. Periods start being more regular once your body starts releasing eggs (ovulation). Ovulation usually begins 1 to 2 years after your period starts, but it can happen before your first period. When your periods are regular, you may have them every 22 to 35 days.

Periods usually last 3 to 7 days. You will need to use pads or tampons to help absorb the blood that comes out. It may seem like a lot of blood, but it is usually only about 2 to 5 tablespoons with each period.

Some girls have lower abdominal pain and cramping during ovulation or during their period. The pain can be mild or severe. If it happens before your period starts, the pain is caused by ovulation and usually lasts a short time. Cramps most often happen during your period. They are caused by the chemicals that cause shedding of the lining of your uterus. You may have pain for only a day or it may last for your entire period. Taking ibuprofen usually helps. If it doesn't help, ask your doctor about stronger medicine.

You may want to carry a tampon or pad with you so you are ready when your first period starts. Often this happens about 2 and 1/2 years after your breasts start developing. The average age for a girl's period to start is 12 years old. Some girls start their periods as early as age 8 or as late as 16. If you get your period earlier than 8 or still haven't had a period after age 16, then you should talk to an adult or your healthcare provider about it.

What is masturbation?

During puberty you may start to have sexual feelings because of the increase in hormones in your body. You may find that touching or rubbing your genital area feels good. This is called masturbation. Many girls masturbate during adolescence. It is a natural way to explore your body and is quite normal. People often joke about it, but it is important to know that there are no bad things that happen from masturbating.

What about acne?

One part of puberty that teenagers don't like is acne. It is a normal part of growing up caused by your changing hormones. For some girls, acne may be mild, but for others it may get pretty bad. Using nonprescription medicine is OK if your acne is mild, but if it seems to be more serious, you may want to see your healthcare provider for medicine to help treat it.

What else changes during puberty?

As you go through puberty you start to have a wide range of feelings. You are trying to figure out your place in the world. You become more independent and start doing things without your parents. You may be influenced by your friends' ideas and feel pressure to do things that you may not agree with, like using drugs or alcohol. It is a time to start sorting out your values and decide what is right and wrong.

As part of this, you may start to have strong sexual urges. You may develop a romantic attraction to someone and start dating. You may feel like you are in love one day and not the next. It is natural to have feelings that change quickly. You may start thinking about having sex. Take time to think through your decision before you have sex. You need to think about the physical and emotional risks you will be taking. If you decide to have sex (intercourse) or oral sex (kissing a partner's genitals), it is important to talk with your partner about what you are doing and the risks involved. You can get pregnant or get an infection from sex. The only way to prevent pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection 100% of the time is to not have sex.

If you decide to have sex, you may choose to start using birth control, such as the pill, patch, or shots. To help prevent pregnancy, you should start birth control before you have sex for the first time. Latex condoms are another way to help prevent pregnancy. Condoms can also protect you from some infections.

Who can I talk to about these changes?

You can talk to your healthcare provider, parents, friends, and teachers about the changes you are going through.

You may find that you feel distanced from your parents. You may be uncomfortable talking with them or other adults about your interests and feelings. The adults may feel the same way. Remember that your culture, music, and clothing styles are different than what your parents are used to. Your parents may not seem to be in touch with your world, but they really want to know what you are feeling and going through. Be open when they ask you about things like sex, drugs, and friendships. If you feel like your parents are not meeting your needs, talk to them about it and ask them if you can spend more time together. Deep down, they truly want the best for you. Parents can be your best resource and strongest support.

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Published by RelayHealth.

Last Modified: 6/29/2012

Last Reviewed: 4/12/2012

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