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Puberty and Adolescence for Girls

Puberty refers to the physical changes that occur during adolescence—the time when a child grows into an adult. During this time, the youngster will obtain sexual maturity, meaning that the body will become capable of making a baby. Although there is no set age when these changes occur, most girls experience puberty between the ages of eight and 16. Boys generally go through puberty a few years later.

The process of puberty can begin quickly during adolescence. Chemicals in the body are released causing the body to rapidly grow and change in ways that may make girls and boys feel awkward—both physically and emotionally. These hormones cause a child’s hands and feet to grow larger, for instance. They also cause the arms and legs to grow longer. Sometimes this occurs very quickly, indeed; consequently, adolescents may be more clumsy at this time, literally stumbling over their own feet.

Girls and boys experience some changes during puberty that are similar. For example: Both begin to grow hair under the arms, on the legs, and in the pubic area; the sweat glands start to produce more body odor; the hair and face become oilier, sometimes causing pimples or acne; they grow taller and heavier; and both undergo a voice change, but this is much more noticeable for boys.

Some changes during puberty, however, are very different for girls and boys. A girl begins to grow wider through the hips and her breasts begin to grow. She also begins to menstruate, or bleed from the vagina. This is often called having a period, and although it may be unpredictable for the first several months, it soon becomes a regular monthly occurrence. Menstruation signals that a girl is physically able to have a baby if she has sexual intercourse.

This is what happens in the body during the menstrual cycle: An egg cell grows in one of the ovaries. The egg leaves the ovary and travels down the fallopian tube to the uterus, also called the womb. The uterus is the female organ where a baby grows during pregnancy. Each month, the lining of the uterus thickens with blood to prepare to nourish a baby. If the egg does not meet with sperm from the male, it disintegrates. This nourishing blood lining is not needed, and the uterus squeezes this lining out through the vagina and it naturally leaves the body. This is menstruation.

Normally, having your period will not interfere with your usual activities, such as sports, dancing, or swimming. A menstrual pad worn between the legs or a tampon inserted into the vagina will usually absorb the blood flow. However, some girls may not feel like doing everything they normally do during this time. In fact, it’s not unusual for girls to feel tired or irritable before their period begins and some may experience cramping and other discomforts, as

well. Sometimes exercise or a hot bath will help. However, some girls get very painful cramps and may need medication (or pills) to help relieve the discomfort. Other girls feel just fine during their periods.

During all these changes that occur during puberty, it's also not unusual for both boys and girls to compare themselves with others. This comparison often occurs with their own peers at school and in locker rooms. As a result, many youngsters will tend to feel self-conscious or unhappy with their bodies. A girl may think her breasts are too small or too large. A boy may think his penis is too long or too short, too thick or too thin. The fact is that there is no such thing as a "right" size or shape of a breast or a penis or a human being, for that matter. It's important to remember that few people in real life look like models or celebrities; besides, the pictures in magazines are usually retouched and enhanced.

While all these physical changes are happening, young people are also developing ideas about what is important to them. Puberty can be a very confusing time, particularly since a girl or boy might realize that she or he thinks differently from others. Sometimes that can mean conflict, hurt, and pain—especially when it involves parents, siblings, or friends. Part of growing up means learning that—for many things—there is no "right" or "wrong," just different opinions.



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