

Girls & Puberty

Body changes you should know about

Puberty signals a time for growth and change in your body — from girl to young woman. It also prepares your body for having babies. Not all girls experience puberty at the same age. It usually begins between 9 and 13 years of age and ends when you reach adult height and size, usually between ages 15-17.

Here are some of the things you'll notice as your body continues to develop:

Breasts

Breast growth is usually the first sign of puberty in girls. When your breasts develop, you may notice small, tender lumps under one or both nipples. These are called breast buds and they'll get larger over the next few years. The nipples and the area surrounding the nipple (areolas) will get larger and darker. Your breasts may feel tender as they grow. Don't worry if one breast grows faster than the other. They'll eventually even out, though it is rare for breasts to look exactly the same. As your breasts develop, you may need to start wearing a bra.

Hair

Soft hair will begin to grow in your pubic area — the V-shaped patch of skin between your hipbones and your legs. This hair will eventually darken and become thick and curly.

You also may notice hair under your arms and on your legs. Many women shave this hair, but it is a personal choice. If you decide to shave, make sure you use a lot of soap and water and a clean razor that's made for women. It is better to use your own razor or electric shaver — don't share one with family or friends.

Body Shape & Size

As you get older, your hips will get wider and your waist will get smaller. Your body also will begin to build up fat in the stomach, buttocks and legs. This is normal and gives your body the curvier shape of a woman.

Also, don't be surprised if your arms, legs, hands and feet grow faster than the rest of your body. Don't worry, the rest of your body will catch up, but you may feel a little clumsy. Also, you may experience cramped feelings in your legs during this growth spurt. These "growing pains" happen now and then, but usually go away after puberty.

Skin

As your body grows, your glands grow, too. This means your skin may get oilier and you may sweat more. You'll most likely sweat more under your arms and as the sweat mixes with bacteria, it will cause an odor. For this reason, it's good to bathe every day and use deodorant or antiperspirant under your arms to control the odor and the sweating.

These changes also may cause pimples on your face. This is called acne and is normal during puberty because your hormone levels are high. The best way to control acne is to keep your face clean by washing it daily with mild soap or cleanser (but don't scrub too hard!). Don't pick at or pop your pimples because oil and dirt from your fingers can only make things worse and may scar your skin. If your acne gets severe, talk to your parents or caregiver.

Getting Your Period

During puberty, you also will start experiencing your menstrual cycle (or period) in which fluid containing blood flows out of the uterus through the vagina. The amount of fluid is small, and the flow usually lasts 2-8 days. You'll probably get your period every 25-40 days.

Having your period signals that your body is preparing to have a baby some day. However, because there's no baby, the lining of blood and fluid in your uterus sheds, and you have a period.

You'll probably get your first period between ages 9 and 15, usually 1 or 2 years after your breasts begin to develop and your pubic hair begins to grow. You'll most likely notice your period by seeing a red or rusty colored stain in your underwear. When you see this, wipe yourself clean. If you don't have a tampon or sanitary napkin, put a tissue, toilet paper or piece of paper towel in your underwear.

You'll want to wear sanitary pads or tampons to help control the period. Pads fit into the crotch of your underpants and soak up the fluids as they leave your body. Tampons are placed into your vagina and soak up the fluids before they leave your body. A string hangs from the tampon so you can pull it out.

Change your pad or take out your tampon every 2-4 hours and use a fresh one. Never leave a tampon in more than 8 hours. At night, use a pad and change it first thing in the morning.

Always remember your parents or caregiver can help you with any questions you may have.

Other Changes

You may notice a small, sticky discharge that's clear or whitish in color in your underpants. This is coming from your vagina. If it looks greenish or has a strong smell, or if your vulva feels itchy or swollen — this could mean you have an infection, so tell your parents or caregiver. (The vulva is the folds of tissue between your legs.)

To help keep from getting infections, keep the area between your legs clean and dry. It's important to wash regularly to get rid of all the sweat and bacteria in that area. Avoid bubble bath, heavily scented soaps or scented toilet paper. These can irritate your vagina and the delicate skin of your vulva. ■

Resources

Schaefer, V.L. (1998). *American girl library: The care and keeping of you: The body book for girls*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2005). *Puberty information for boys and girls: Public education brochure*. Retrieved Sept. 23, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.aap.org/family/puberty.htm>.

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