

Puberty

Puberty is the time when a young person's sexual and reproductive organs mature. Before any physical changes happen, the body starts making hormones that trigger sexual development and growth.

Puberty starts at around 11 years of age for girls and 12 years for boys, give or take a year or so. Physical changes can be seen at around 11 to 14 years of age for most girls and around 13 to 16 years of age for most boys. A lot of emotional changes happen alongside these physical changes, and young people also start to think differently.

Physical changes for girls

The physical changes that happen for girls around puberty include:

- **Height** – they'll grow taller.
- **Curves develop** – their hips will widen and their body will get curvier.
- **Breasts start to form** – the first stage is called 'budding'. Sometimes the breasts are different sizes. This is completely normal, but girls can have a talk with a doctor if they're worried.
- **Hair growth** – hair will start to grow around the pubic area and under the arms, and hair on the legs and arms will darken.
- **Vaginal discharge** – they might start to get a clear or whitish discharge from the vagina. This is a natural self-cleaning process and isn't anything to worry about.
- **Periods** – menstrual periods will start, where they bleed from the vagina each month. Periods are the body's way of getting ready for pregnancy by removing the lining of the uterus (womb) that's been growing over the last month.
- **Period pain** – they might start to have pain or cramps just before or at the start of their period. Exercise, a hot water bottle held to the abdomen (tummy) or over-the-counter pain medication may help. If the pain gets too much, girls should see a doctor.

Menstrual periods

Girls can't tell exactly when they'll get their period. Usually, a period will start lightly, where they might notice a damp or wet feeling. This allows them plenty of time to get to the bathroom.

Some girls get period pain or cramps in the lower abdomen (tummy), which tells them they'll get their period soon. Girls might also get a clear or whitish discharge from the vagina between periods, before they get their first period, or both.

Periods can be irregular, especially at first. They may vary in how often they happen and how long they last. After the first year or so, periods tend to become more regular, usually occurring once every four weeks.

Pads and tampons

Girls should carry a sanitary pad or tampon in their wallet or bag, just in case they get their period away from home. Since it can be a little uncomfortable using tampons at first, some girls choose to use pads until they're more comfortable with their changing bodies. Most girls can use tampons easily, especially the slim ones. Girls should keep pads and tampons wrapped up and clean until they're used. They should also change pads and tampons regularly, at least four or five times a day, depending on how heavy their blood flow is.

To make sure the vagina doesn't get too dry, girls might need to use slimmer tampons or a pad when their flow is light. There's a very small risk of an infection called toxic shock syndrome if tampons aren't changed regularly.

Physical changes for boys

The physical changes that happen for boys around puberty include:

- **Height and muscle** – they'll get taller and stronger and start to grow muscle.
- **Genitals** – their testicles and penis will get bigger. It's normal for one testicle to be bigger than the other. Some boys worry about their penis size, but sexual function – including the ability to have sex and father children – doesn't depend on penis size. Boys can have a talk with a doctor if they're worried.
- **Hair growth** – body hair starts to grow around the pubic area, legs, under the arms and on the face. It starts off fine and then gets coarser and darker. Some young men keep growing and getting more body hair right into their 20s.
- **Voice changes** – their voice gets deeper. This is sometimes called 'voice breaking' because of the ups and downs in voice tone.
- **Wet dreams** – they might have wet dreams, where they ejaculate in their sleep. This is a completely normal part of growing up.
- **Erections** – sometimes erections happen when they get nervous or excited, or for no reason at all, which can make them feel embarrassed. Other people usually don't notice them and they'll go away after a few minutes.
- **Breast changes** – they might get some breast growth and tenderness. This is a normal response to the changing hormones in their body and will eventually go away.

Emotional changes for girls and boys

Along with the many physical changes, a lot of emotional changes happen around puberty for both boys and girls. They include:

- **Coping with a changing body** – young people have to deal with sudden physical changes. They now have a new body shape and might start to feel self-conscious about how they look. They might feel embarrassed if they think they're different to their friends. Other people might start to treat them differently. For example, if they look older, they might be treated as an older person.
- **Frustration because they feel different** – it can be difficult coping with early physical changes or frustrating waiting for them to happen.
- **Mood swings** – the sudden release of hormones into a young person's body can bring about extreme emotions and mood swings, but this is only temporary and will settle after a while. Parents might complain about these moods, but it can help to remember they're mostly caused by the changing hormone levels affecting the way the young person feels.
- **Energy changes** – the physical growth and other changes can make a young person feel full of energy one minute and tired the next.

A young person's thinking will change

The way that young people think changes around puberty as they develop their own identity as an individual rather than as part of a family. They're starting to determine their own standards and ideals, form their own ideas, morals and values, and rely less on their parents.

A young person's relationship with their parents

Young people might want more independence, but not want to give up the support of their parents just yet. This can mean feeling like an adult one minute and a child the next. It might also mean they sometimes act impulsively and engage in risk-taking behaviour.

Parents may worry when their child wants to go out on their own and act independently because they're concerned about their safety and wellbeing. They might know first hand or have heard of situations where young people have been taken advantage of. They're also probably aware of the risks some young people take and might have even taken these same risks themselves when they were growing up.

This can lead to conflict between parents who want to keep their child safe and the young person who wants independence. Young people and their parents should try to sit down and work through these issues together.

Getting through puberty

Puberty can be an unsettling time for a young person. It can also be an exciting time as they move from childhood to adulthood and take on all the rights and responsibilities that come with being an adult. Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people. It can help to remember that everyone needs to be understanding and patient.

Parents are learning too. If there are disagreements, young people should try to listen to what their parents have to say and let them know their point of view. It can help if young people show their parents through their actions that they can take care of themselves.

Young people should also try to be considerate by letting their parents know where they are and if they have a change of plans. This can make a big difference and will help show parents that their child can act responsibly and safely.

When a young person handles situations calmly and maturely, the trust their parents have in them will grow and they'll come to realise their child is on their way to being able to take care of themselves.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952
- Family Planning Victoria's youth Action Centre (for people aged under 25 years) Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or 1800 013 952
- Local community health centre

Things to remember

- Puberty is the time in a young person's life when their sexual and reproductive organs mature.
- Alongside the many physical changes, a lot of emotional changes also happen for both boys and girls.
- Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

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