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## Is my body normal? (Girls)

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### Summary

- Girls' bodies come in all shapes and sizes – there is no 'normal'.
  - Puberty for girls can start at any age between 8 and 13.
  - A lot of different changes will happen to your body during puberty, and it is easy to feel self-conscious. Try not to compare yourself with others.
  - The best thing you can do is look after yourself, and stay healthy.
  - If you are having a difficult time with body issues or self-esteem, talk to someone – a friend or family member, your doctor or a counselling service such as [Kids Helpline](#). There are lots of places to get help.
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**Puberty** is a time when your body goes through lots of changes. It's wonderful and exciting, and can sometimes feel overwhelming.

This is the time your body changes from being a girl into being a woman, and develops the ability to have a baby. All of the changes come from your body's natural chemicals, called hormones.

Puberty for girls usually starts between the ages of 8 and 13, and lasts a few years. Girls who are overweight may start puberty a little earlier, and girls who are athletic or underweight may start later.

If you haven't started developing breasts by age 12, or had your first period by age 15 (or if you are concerned about any body issues), talk to an adult (like your mum) or your doctor. The main thing to remember is that no two bodies are exactly the same, so puberty will not be the same for everyone.

How you see yourself, how you feel about the way you look, and how you think others see you is known as **body image**. It's common to wonder if you're normal as you go through the changes of puberty. But comparing yourself too closely with others can be stressful and unrealistic. The important thing to remember is: girls' bodies come in all shapes and sizes – there is no 'normal'.

The best things you can do are:

- be educated and informed, so you know what to expect
- take care of your body so you stay healthy and strong.

### Physical growth for girls

One of the most obvious things that happens to you during puberty is that you grow. You might find your hands and feet grow first, so you may be a bit clumsy and awkward at first. The rest of your body will catch up though, and you'll feel more coordinated again.

Usually, girls hit their peak growth time around two years after puberty starts. You might find you grow very quickly. It's around this time that **menstruation (your period)** starts, too.

After your peak growth phase, your growth will slow down and you might only grow around 5–7.5 cm after that.

### Weight gain

Your growth spurt might include some weight gain, especially around your hips (which become curvier) and your breasts.

This fat is normal. Female bodies need more fat to have a healthy reproductive and menstrual cycle.

You may develop stretch marks, if your body grows very quickly and your skin scars as it stretches. Stretch marks may start out being bright red, but over time they usually fade to a silvery white that you can hardly see.

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## Growing breasts

Growing breasts can be stressful and embarrassing, especially if you compare yourself with friends or celebrities, or if other people notice and make comments. It's normal for breasts to grow at varying rates. And they can keep developing until you're 17 or 18 years old, or sometimes into your twenties.

Nipples change during puberty too. It's normal for their colour to become pink or dark brown, and for them to grow occasional hairs. And sometimes they can turn inward, or stick out.

Breast size and shape can run in the family, so your mother's breasts can be a good indicator of what yours will look like. Of course, other factors such as your weight can also affect the shape and size of your breasts.

## Menstruation (getting your period)

Many girls get their first **period** around two years after their breasts first start to grow. But it can start earlier or later. And everyone's experience is different.

So what is happening when you have your period? Each month, the lining of your uterus (your womb) becomes thick with blood to help a fertilised egg to grow (if the egg that you released that month has been fertilised by a sperm). If the lining is not needed because there is no fertilised egg, that lining sheds, and blood comes out of your vagina.

Only a couple of tablespoons of blood comes out with each period, but it can seem like a lot more. Blood flow is usually heavier in the first day or two and can be bright or dark red. The flow usually becomes lighter and the blood may turn brown towards the end of your period.

While a 28-day cycle is common, it can take some time for periods to settle into that pattern. At first, you might have two periods in one month, or you may skip a month.

Your period will usually last between two and eight days, and can come every 21 to 35 days.

## What is the vulva?

The vulva is the name for your outer genitals (the ones that are outside of your body). Your vulva includes:

- the opening of your vagina
- the inner and outer lips (labia) around your vagina
- the clitoris (a small bump of tissue located above the opening of your vagina, at the top of the inner labia – it is covered by a small flap of skin, and is very sensitive).

The vagina is a passage that leads from the opening (between the labia) to the cervix (the neck of the womb). Vaginas come in different shapes, sizes and colours. Some are small and egg-shaped, while others are large and cylindrical. Colours can range from light pink to a reddish-brown pink. The only thing that matters is that it works properly.

During puberty, your vagina starts to produce a discharge to keep itself moist and clean. This discharge can become thicker and stickier at some points during your menstrual cycle.

It's perfectly normal for the discharge to have a light odour. But if it becomes quite smelly, or turns a dark yellow or green colour, it's important to see a doctor because it could be an infection.

The labia are the folds of skin – or lips – that you can see on either side of the vaginal opening. The outer ones are called the labia majora. The inner ones are called the labia minora. They are there to protect your vagina.

If you look at labia in magazines and pornography, you might think labia all look the same, or that there is one look we should all aspire to. But that's not true.

There are many healthy and natural ways for labia to look. The **Labia Library** was set up to show that, just like all other parts of our bodies, labia come in different shapes, sizes and colours.

## Body hair

Your body starts to grow hair in new places during puberty: under your arms, in your pubic area, and sometimes even your upper lip. The hair on your arms and legs may also get darker and thicker.

Pubic hair can grow at any point during puberty, usually starting with a few straight strands and becoming darker

and curlier as it grows. Eventually it will grow into a thick triangle over your pubic region, and may spread to your inner thighs.

If you grow hair on your chest or chin, it may be a sign that you have a hormone imbalance. Don't worry, but make an appointment to see your doctor.

### **Sweat**

Your body will naturally start to sweat more during puberty. When this sweat mixes with bacteria, such as under your arms, it can cause body odour.

You can minimise this by showering every day with soap, and using an antiperspirant or deodorant. An antiperspirant reduces the amount of sweat that reaches the skin's surface. A deodorant reduces the amount of bacteria on the skin that causes the odour.

If you develop a rash from using an antiperspirant, you might be allergic to aluminium. There are antiperspirants available that do not use aluminium, so try one of those instead.

It may also help to wear natural fabrics, such as cotton and linen, or clothes made of fabrics that wick moisture and dry faster, such as polyester blends. They will help you avoid body odour and won't show underarm sweat stains as much.

You might find your feet sweat more during puberty too, which can cause foot odour. Try to avoid shoes made of man-made materials. And don't wear the same shoes every day – give them a chance to dry completely between wears.

### **Acne**

**Acne** – which refers to whiteheads, blackheads and pimples – is caused by hormones and blocked pores in the skin. Some girls will get a lot of acne, and some won't get much at all.

If you have a problem with acne, try cleansing your skin with a gentle non-soap cleanser. Over-the-counter acne treatment products that contain benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid can also help. And try to use sunscreens, moisturisers and makeup that are labelled as 'oil-free' or 'non-comedogenic'.

If these products don't help with your acne, don't worry, there is more you can do. Your doctor can refer you to a dermatologist, who can help you to find a treatment.

### **Making friends with your body**

With all the changes you go through during **puberty**, it can be easy to become self-conscious and uncomfortable with your **body**. It's natural to want to look good and feel confident in your own skin.

You may not be able to control all the changes you're going through, but you can control how well you look after yourself, inside and out. You will look and feel your best when you get enough sleep, eat a healthy balanced diet and get enough exercise every day.

It can also help to remember all the great things your body can do. That might be playing the piano, doing martial arts, going bushwalking, running, or spinning a hula hoop.

And don't let yourself fall into the trap of comparing yourself with celebrities in magazines or on social media. They have a team of professionals – and often photo editing software – to make them look like that.

Try to hang out with people who have healthy attitudes towards their bodies, and who don't spend their time criticising themselves or others.

### **Dealing with body image issues**

If you're struggling with issues to do with your body or self-esteem, it will help to talk to someone you can trust – perhaps a family member or friend, or your doctor.

Even if you aren't having a difficult time, it's important to see your doctor from time to time to talk about how things are going. Try to have a general check-up with your doctor at least once a year, particularly while you are going through puberty.

### **Remember**

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- A lot of different changes will happen to your body during puberty, and it is easy to feel self-conscious. Try not to compare yourself with others.
- The best thing you can do is look after yourself, and stay healthy.
- If you are having a difficult time with body issues or self-esteem, talk to someone – a friend or family member, your doctor or a counselling service such as **Kids Helpline**. There are lots of places to get help.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- A parent, an older sibling, a trusted family friend, or friend's parent
- Your school counsellor, or another trusted adult
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- **Family Planning Victoria** Tel. 1800 013 952
- **ReachOut**
- **The labia library**
- **Butterfly Foundation** National Helpline, to talk to someone about body image concerns Tel. 1800 33 4673

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Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV)

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