Puberty

Summary

- Puberty is the time in a young person’s life when their sexual and reproductive organs mature.
- Alongside 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.

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

Puberty starts at around 10 years for girls and 12 years for boys, give or take a year or so. Physical changes can be seen at around 10 to 14 years for most girls and around 11 to 15 years 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 around puberty

The physical changes that happen for girls around puberty include:

- Height – they will grow taller.
- Curves – their hips will widen and their body will get curvier.
- Breast growth – the first stage is called ‘budding’. Sometimes, the breasts are different sizes. This is normal, but girls can speak with a doctor if they are 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 may start to get a clear or whitish discharge from the vagina. This is a normal, natural self-cleaning process.
- Periods – menstrual periods will start. Periods are part of a monthly cycle where the lining of the uterus (womb) thickens as the body gets ready for pregnancy. Once a month, the lining is shed over a few days, if a pregnancy has not happened.
- Period pain – they may 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.

Physical changes for boys around puberty

The physical changes that happen for boys around puberty include:

- Height and muscle growth – they will get taller and stronger and start to grow muscle.
- Genital growth – their testicles and penis will get bigger. It is 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, does not depend on penis size. Boys can speak with a doctor if they are 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 thicker and darker. Some young men keep growing and getting more body hair 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 may have wet dreams, where they ejaculate in their sleep. This is a 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 will not usually notice them and they will go away after a few minutes.

• Breast changes – they may 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 around puberty**

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

• Coping with a changing body – young people have to deal with a lot of physical changes that happen around the same time. They now have a new body shape and may start to feel self-conscious about how they look. They may feel embarrassed if they think they are different from their friends. Other people may start to treat them differently. For example, if they look older, they may be treated like 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 will settle after a while. Parents may find these moods difficult to deal with, but it can help to remember these are 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 moment and tired the next.

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

**Young people and their parents around puberty**

Young people may want more independence, but not want to give up the support of their parents just yet. This can mean sometimes feeling like an adult and sometimes feeling like a child. It may also mean they sometimes act impulsively and take risks.

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

This can lead to arguments 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.

It is important for parents to communicate openly with their child and to make sure their child knows they can come to them to talk about anything, including any issues they may be having. This is one of the best ways for parents to know what their child is up to, to help keep them safe and to give them advice that will help them to make good decisions.

**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 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 will 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 freecall 1800 013 952
- **Family Planning Victoria’s Action Centre** Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Community health centre

**Things to remember**
- Puberty is the time in a young person's life when their sexual and reproductive organs mature.
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Family Planning Victoria

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