Puberty

Summary

- Puberty is a phase of rapid growth, at the end of which the body reaches reproductive maturity. Other body systems mature during this time too.
- Puberty is a time of rapid brain development and identity formation, with many emotional changes for both boys and girls.
- Adjusting to puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.
- With good communication and support from family and friends most young people negotiate puberty effectively.

Puberty is the time when all your major organs and body systems mature. At the end of puberty, you are sexually and reproductively mature. The growth and development that occurs during puberty is prompted by changes in the levels of certain hormones in your body.

Hormonal changes begin in the mid-primary school years, but puberty properly starts at around 10 years for girls and 11 years for boys. Everyone is different – you may start puberty earlier or later. Girls typically start puberty well before boys.

As puberty advances, both boys and girls experience many emotional changes; for many, it is a time of choosing different ways of engaging with family, friends and teachers.

Physical changes for girls around puberty

The physical changes that happen for girls around puberty include:

- **Body shape** - Your hips will widen and your body will get curvier.
- **Height** - You will grow taller.
- **Acne** - You may develop acne. This is a condition of the skin that shows up as bumps – most commonly on the face, neck, shoulders, upper back and chest. These bumps can be blackheads, whiteheads, pimples, or cysts. Hormonal changes during puberty cause acne in teens.
- **Breast growth and tenderness** - The first stage of breast growth is called ‘budding’. Sometimes the breasts are different sizes. The breasts may be tender during this time. This is normal, but speak with your doctor if you are worried.
- **Hair growth** - Hair will start to grow around the pubic area and under your arms, and hair on your legs and arms will darken.
- **Vaginal discharge** - You may start to get a clear or whitish discharge from your vagina. This is a normal, natural self-cleaning process.
- **Periods** - Your 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 irregularity** - Even though periods work as a cycle, that cycle can take different amounts of time each month. For example, you might get your period after 24 days one month and after 42 days the next. These are called irregular periods. Irregular periods are very common, especially in the first few years of getting your period.
- **Period pain** - You may start to have pain or cramps just before or at the start of your 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, see a doctor.

Physical changes for boys around puberty

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The physical changes that happen for boys around puberty include:

- **Height and muscle growth** - You will get taller and stronger and start to grow muscle. This occurs at different rates for everyone.
- **Acne** - You may develop acne. This is a condition of the skin that shows up as bumps – most commonly on the face, neck, shoulders, upper back and chest. These bumps can be blackheads, whiteheads, pimples, or cysts. Hormonal changes during puberty cause acne in teens.
- **Voice changes** - Your voice will get deeper. This is sometimes called ‘voice breaking’ because of the ups and downs in voice tone.
- **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.
- **Genital growth** - Your 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. Talk to a doctor if you are worried.
- **Wet dreams** - You may have wet dreams, where you ejaculate in your sleep. This is a normal part of growing up.
- **Erections** - Sometimes erections happen when you get nervous or excited, or for no reason at all, which can make you feel embarrassed. Other people will not usually notice them and they will go away after a few minutes.
- **Breast changes** - You may get some breast growth and tenderness. This is a normal response to the changing hormones in your body and will eventually go away.

**Emotional changes for girls and boys around puberty**

Emotional changes sometimes occur before the physical changes of puberty. Many young people want to take greater control of their lives as they pass through puberty.

You may find that you are:

- experiencing a greater sense of self
- starting to have a sexual interest in other people.
- experiencing changes of mood, energy and sleep patterns.

Emotional challenges that may emerge at this time include:

- coping with a changing body and feeling self-conscious about looks
- feeling frustrated when you cannot achieve what you want to achieve, and getting angry.

These emotional changes are an important part of you working out your own moral values and identity.

**Support of parents and carers through puberty**

Throughout puberty you may want to gain further independence, but not yet feel ready to give up the support of your parents or carers. This can mean you sometimes feels like an adult and sometimes feels like a child. This is normal.

Exploring, taking risks and sometimes acting impulsively are also normal during this time. Your parents or carers may worry when you want to go out on your own and act independently, because they are concerned about your safety and wellbeing. Your growing wish for independence can lead to arguments with parents or carers wanting to keep you safe. It generally works best if you discuss and work through these issues together.

**Parenting a child through puberty**

Being a parent of a child going through puberty is sometimes not easy. It is important to maintain good communication and be available if troubles happen. It is also important to maintain clear rules and expectations. Allowing greater independence needs to go hand in glove with setting and communicating clear limits. For more information, read Parenting children through puberty.

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Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your parents or carers, teachers and friends
- Youthbeyondblue Tel. 1300 22 4636
- headspace - National Youth Mental Health Foundation Tel. 1800 650 980
- Kids Helpline – mood swings Tel. 1800 55 1800 (24 hours, 7 days)
- Reachout
- Reachout – identity and gender
- Butterfly National Helpline – eating disorder and body image issues support Tel. 1800 33 4673
- 1800RESPECT - National Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Counselling Service Tel. 1800 737 732 (24 hours, 7 days)
- What’s OK at Home? (WOAH) - Domestic Violence Resource Centre, information and support for young people and families experiencing domestic violence
- Young and eSafe, Office of the eSafety Commissioner
- Drinkwise
- Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) for people aged between 12 and 21 who are experiencing problems related to alcohol and other drugs Tel: 1800 458 685
- Love: the good, the bad and the ugly – advice and stories

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