

About Puberty

Your body is changing; your moods may be unpredictable and sometimes even unexplainable. Don't worry. These changes during your teen years are normal.

Both boys and girls go through many changes during the teenage years. And while changes in girls are different than those experienced by boys, all of these changes are a natural part of your development into an adult. These changes are called puberty.

Puberty-How Your Body Changes

Puberty lasts for several years and marks the life stage when your body is changing from a child to an adult. Hormones help trigger and guide this process. Hormones are natural chemicals in your body that produce gradual physical changes during this time and may also cause emotional changes that can sometimes seem uncontrollable. These changes are common during puberty and they happen to everyone. Though it may seem that these changes and feeling are out of your control, don't worry, you're still you, just the "growing up" version.

Girls, one of the first changes you will notice is your breast growing, usually between the ages of eight and 12. Sometimes, one breast might grow larger than the other. Don't worry, they will most likely even out before they are finished developing. Just like your ears, they aren't always a perfect match. This is true for every young woman. Once your breasts start growing, you will most likely want to buy a bra.

Another change you will notice is hair growth. Hair will grow under your arms, on your legs and on your pubic area. Shaving your underarms and legs is a personal choice. Some women do, others don't. It's your choice. If you decide to shave, make sure you use your own razor. Don't share razors with friends. And use either shaving cream or soap and water as a lubricant for shaving. If you want to shave, you should check with your parents first.

A less noticeable change is the widening of your hips and the slimming of your waist. Your stomach, bottom and legs might change shape too. All of

these changes are making you look more like a woman than a girl, and they are all normal, expected changes.

Another sign of puberty could be all over your face. It's called acne, pimples, or "zits" This aggravating condition may be mild (blackheads and whiteheads), moderate (larger inflamed-looking blemishes) or severe (large cysts or nodules). Greasy foods and dirt do not cause acne; acne is caused by a build-up of oil, microorganisms and dead skin cells in the hair follicles under the skin. When whiteheads rupture, the "acne cascade" is triggered and surrounding tissue is affected. Keeping your face clean is one way to combat acne. Also, don't squeeze pimples. This can make them much worse and increase the chance of scarring. Often the condition of your skin during puberty will be similar to what your parents experienced when they were teenagers. If your acne concerns you, talk to your parents and/or a health care professional. Acne can be treated.

Your menstrual period

The most significant change during puberty for many girls is their first period. Menstruation is a turning point in your development from a child to a teenager. Among other things, it means you are capable of becoming pregnant. Your first period can be unexpected and you might feel surprised to find that you have some bleeding from your vagina. Many young women might feel frightened by the sight of this bleeding or embarrassed if it causes a stain on their underwear or clothing. It's important to remember that this is a natural process and something that makes being a woman special. You can avoid any embarrassing situations by talking to your mom or another adult (even some dads know about this stuff, too!) about being prepared for your period.

Your first period is likely to occur between the ages of nine and 16. It usually lasts for three to seven days and then stops until the next period begins -- usually about 21 to 28 days after your period started. This time frame - from the first day you begin to bleed until the first day of your NEXT menstrual period is called your "menstrual cycle."

During your menstrual cycle, one of your two ovaries releases one microscopic egg, called an ovum. (Your ovaries are reproductive organs

approximately one and a half inches long and located in your lower abdomen, one on each side of your uterus; ovaries also release hormones that help to control your menstrual cycle.) The egg's release from the ovary is called "ovulation," and usually happens in the middle of your cycle -- around day 12 to 14 in a 28-day cycle. Ovulation can be irregular, though, when you first start having your period.

The egg then moves through one of the two fallopian tubes (the two tubes attached to the top of the uterus that lead to the ovaries). At the same time, body tissues and blood cells are beginning to line the walls of your uterus, forming a thin layer of material that will become your period. The amazing thing about it is, you won't feel any of this happening.

If you were to have sexual intercourse at this time, and sperm from a penis fertilizes your egg on its way to the uterus, you would become pregnant. The egg would attach itself to the lining of the uterus and a fetus would grow inside of you. However, if sperm does not fertilize the egg, your body does not need this lining to support the fertilized egg. So, hormones trigger a different process and this lining gently falls away from the walls of your uterus and is released from your body through your vagina. This lining is the fluid and blood your body discharges during your menstrual period, this is often called "flow."

What you'll need

To avoid bleeding on your clothes, you will need to use sanitary pads, pantliners or tampons during your period. Sanitary pads and pantliners fit inside your underwear and are kept in place with an adhesive strip on the back of the pad. There are a variety of pads with various thickness, lengths and absorbencies available for your use. Don't worry, you will find one that fits your body and absorbs your menstrual flow well. Pantliners can be used at the beginning or end of your period when your flow is lighter.

Tampons are inserted into the vagina to absorb menstrual flow. Make sure you read the manufacturers' directions for putting a tampon in your vagina correctly. Both pads and tampons should be changed every four to eight hours or more often if needed. Both the number of days of your period and the amount of menstrual flow is different for every woman. On a heavier

flow day it is not uncommon to soak more than six pads or tampons in one day. But if you find yourself needing to change your pad or tampon more often than that, you should talk to your parent, school nurse or health care professional.

It might take a while, perhaps even a year or longer, for your periods to become regular every month. During the first year, you may have your period as often as every two or three weeks, or as infrequently as every few months. Your periods can be heavy or light and blood flow may change from month to month. Even after your periods become regular, exercise, stress or a change in diet could throw it off track. Don't feel discouraged, this may take some getting used to but the more you know about your body and your menstrual cycle, the better you will be able to deal with it. If you anticipate your period is approaching, you may want to wear a pantiliner for extra protection.

Here are some things you might want to consider keeping with you:

- * Two pads, liners and/or tampons, depending on your preference, in case your period begins unexpectedly.
- * A medication, such as Ibuprofen, which relieves cramps and perhaps other symptoms. Its important to make sure that you don't have any allergies to this medication before taking it, and you should talk with your parent and/or health care professional about how much you can take for your menstrual discomfort. **Medications for discomfort may be given to the school nurse by the parent only. No student is allowed to carry any medication at school.**

How you might feel

You may feel uncomfortable for a few days before your period each month. Your uterus may contract, causing cramps around your pelvic area (below your belly button). You may also feel bloated or "puffy." Breast tenderness and swelling, headaches, moodiness, back and leg aches, acne breakouts and nausea are also common symptoms for many young women when their periods are about to start. These symptoms usually stop or aren't as bad a day or two after your period starts. If any of these or other symptoms is too much

for you to deal with, discuss them with a parent and/or your health care professional. Many of these symptoms can be relieved by lifestyle changes, such as changing certain eating habits, by exercising and with medications.

If, however, you have any of the following symptoms, discuss them with a parent and/or see your school nurse immediately:

- * severe pain
- * heavy bleeding (for example, soaking a pad or tampon every hour)
- * bleeding that lasts more than 8 days
- * bleeding between periods

For more information, see your school nurse.

Premenstrual syndrome

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a term used to describe a group of symptoms that you may experience up to seven to 10 days before your period begins and goes away when your period begins or soon after. PMS can include emotional symptoms such as crying or crankiness, and physical symptoms such as bloating, breast tenderness or headaches. If you have PMS, you're not alone. While about 75 percent of girls and women who menstruate experience some type of menstrual-cycle discomfort, 30 to 40 percent of them experience symptoms severe enough to disrupt their normal activities. These are the symptoms known as PMS.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) is a severe form of PMS that affects about five to seven percent of girls and women who menstruate. The effects of PMDD can make it tough to function at school and in relationships.

Symptoms include:

* Severe mood swings, depression, irritability and anxiety. Do you experience uncontrollable crying spells or anger, or depression so intense you can't function? Emotional symptoms are the ones most likely to lead your health care professional to conclude you have PMDD.

* Difficulty concentrating. Is it impossible or nearly impossible to study or pay attention in class.

* Breast tenderness and bloating. Do your clothes feel too tight? Do your breasts ache?

If you think you might have PMDD, try lifestyle modifications recommended for PMS and talk to a health care professional. Many of the emotional symptoms appear to be associated with low levels of a brain chemical called serotonin. Medication is available that can increase the amount of serotonin in the brain, thereby treating PMDD.

Annual checkups and pelvic exams

Before the onset of puberty, all pre-teens should have a "well-girl exam," according to the Adolescent Wellness and Reproductive Education Foundation. This visit is an opportunity to discuss your questions and concerns with your health care professional. It is also a time for you to gather printed material on a variety of health issues, including your menstrual cycle, contraception and STDs. A gynecological (pelvic) examination is usually not a part of this visit.