

FACTS ABOUT SEX AND BIRTH

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When people talk about the 'facts of life' they usually mean the facts about sex and birth.

But sex is only part of any relationship. Learning about love and how to get on with people is just as important.

You need to know about your own body: how it works, and how to look after it. But in the end, how you feel about yourself and about other people is going to be more important than what you know about the machinery of the human body.

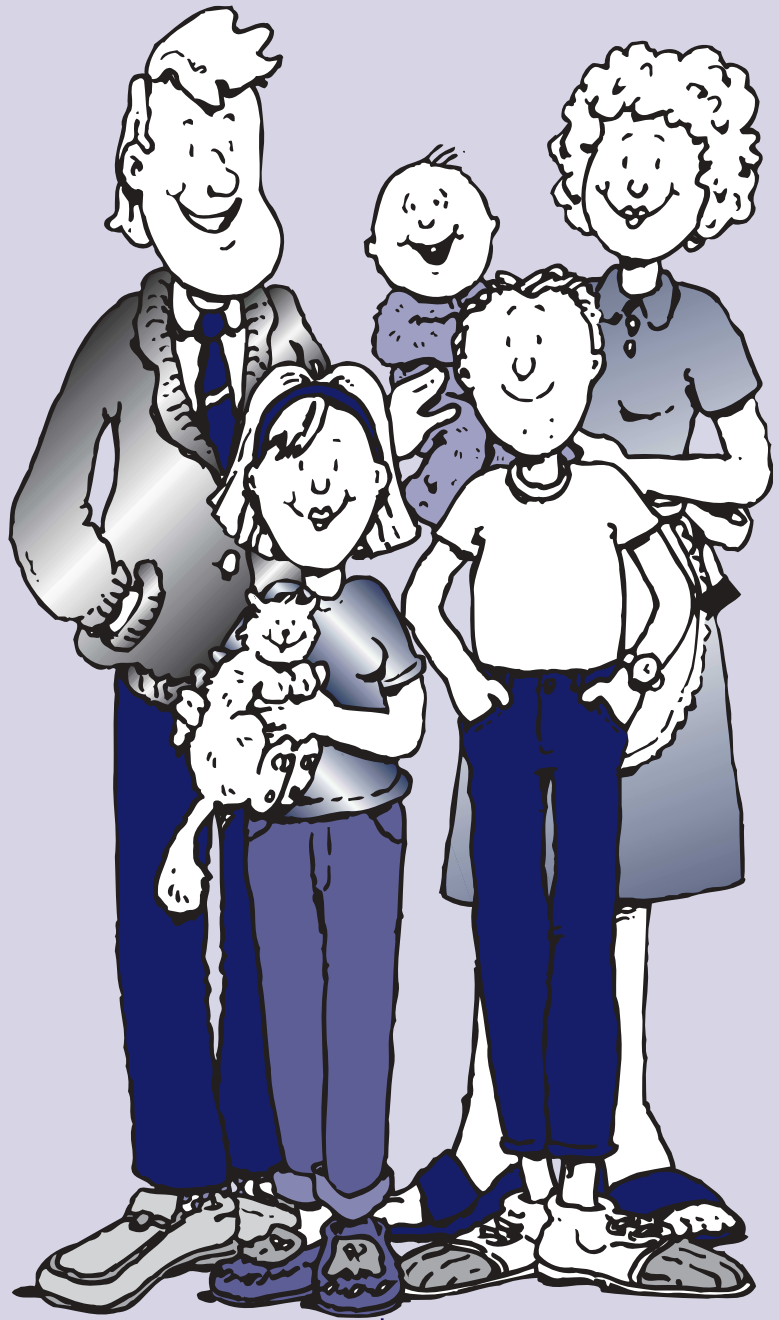
You begin to learn about relationships when you are a baby. You learn by seeing how other people behave towards each other, how they behave to you, and how they expect you to behave. Parents, brothers, sisters, friends, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers ... all the people who are part of your life are teaching you, all the time, what it means to be a girl, or a boy ... and how to behave towards other people. You learn by seeing how they behave.

PUBERTY

As you approach your teen years special glands start to produce more of the hormones that make a girl a woman, or a boy a man. These changes take place gradually. It can take several years from the time they begin, to the time you are physically mature. This 'changeover' period is called puberty.

Girls usually begin puberty earlier than boys — often when they are 11 or 12 years old. Boys usually begin when they are 13 or 14. But for both girls and boys it can begin earlier or much later — everybody is different. If you are a girl, when puberty begins your breasts begin to develop and your body becomes more rounded. Hair begins to grow under your arms and around your pubic area, and you start to have menstrual periods. These periods are a sign that your reproductive organs are maturing.

Any time after the beginning of puberty, your body may start to produce ova (eggs). If an ovum (egg) is fertilised by a male sperm, you could become pregnant. If you are a boy, when puberty begins, hair begins to grow on your body, your voice 'breaks' and becomes deeper, and your sex organs



grow larger and begin to produce spermatozoa (sperm). If you have sex with a girl any time after puberty begins, you could make her pregnant.

YOUR FEELINGS

You may find you feel more emotional than usual during puberty. Your moods might go up and down like a yoyo — wildly happy one minute, so miserable you could howl the next.

You may fall in love for the first time. Falling in love is a powerful emotion. It takes a while to learn how to handle new feelings like this.

The first time you fall in love is very seldom the only time. Some people fall in love quite frequently, others only once. But the person who is 'just right' for you when you are 16, or 18, may not necessarily be the person you want to spend the rest of your life with.

Falling in love can help you learn a lot about yourself and other people. Any permanent relationship when you are older will be based more on knowing about people, than on knowing about sex.

TALKING THINGS OVER

Maybe you feel you want to talk over some of the changes happening during puberty, but think your parents 'wouldn't understand'.

Parents often understand far more than they are given credit for — after all, they can remember their own puberty. But perhaps you feel more comfortable talking to some other relative or friend. Talking things over is a good way to help yourself sort out anything that worries you, about any new situation at all.

THE MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

The illustration on this page shows you the different parts of the male reproductive system.

The testes produce spermatozoa, or sperm. It is these sperm which enable a man to become a father. They can be ejaculated through the penis in a liquid called semen.

Semen consists of both sperm and fluid secreted by various glands. Sperm can only be seen under a microscope, but they are shaped like tiny tadpoles and propel themselves along by wriggling their tails.

In one discharge of semen there are millions of sperm, and any one of them can start a pregnancy, if it unites with an ovum.

Semen is ejaculated through the urethra — the same passage through which you urinate. But semen and urine can never pass along the tube at the same time.

A muscle called the sphincter holds back urine when semen is being ejaculated.

Wet dreams

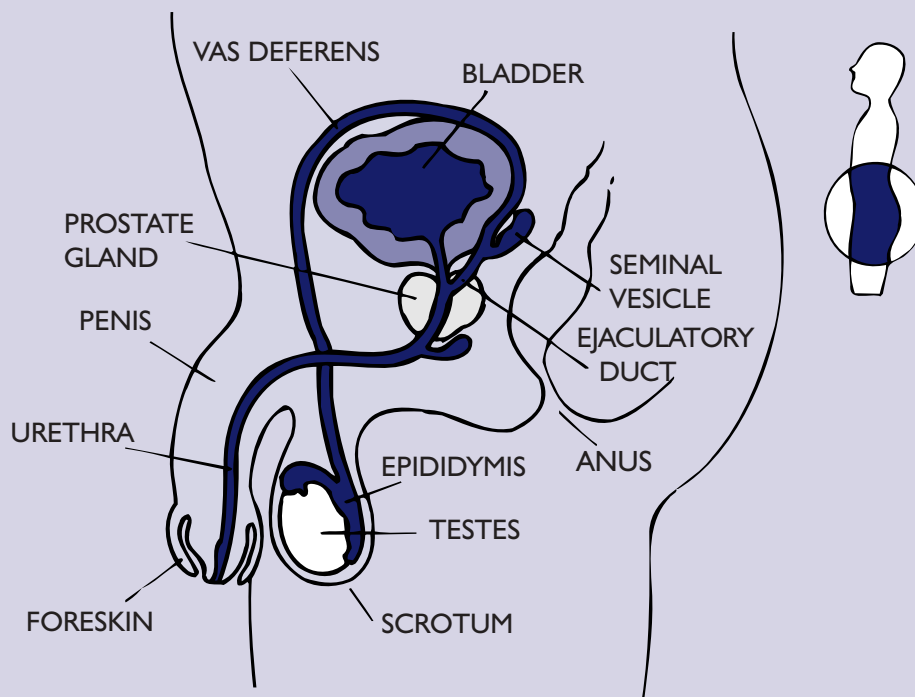
If you are a boy, any time after you reach puberty, ejaculations may happen while you are asleep. They are called 'wet dreams'. Semen is discharged in an involuntary ejaculation. This happens when excess sperm cells have accumulated — it is quite normal.

THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

This illustration shows the female reproductive system from the side. Each woman has two ovaries, one each side, and two Fallopian tubes leading from the ovaries to the uterus (womb) and the vagina. The ovaries store many thousands of tiny eggs, called ova. One end of each Fallopian tube lies close to the ovary, the other is attached to the uterus, which is about the size and shape of a small pear.

The vagina is a muscular, elastic passage

MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



leading out of the body. It is the passage through which a baby is born. The point where the lower part of the uterus connects with the upper part of the vagina is called the cervix, or neck of the womb. In front of the external opening of the vagina is the clitoris, the sensitive part associated with a woman's sexual feelings.

OVULATION AND MENSTRUATION

If you are a girl, about every 28 days after you reach puberty a mature ovum is produced in one of your ovaries. It passes from the ovary along the Fallopian tube to the uterus.

The ovaries also produce a hormone which causes the lining of the uterus to thicken. If the ovum is fertilised, it attaches itself to this thickened uterus lining, which provides the nourishment it needs to develop into a baby.

If the ovum is not fertilised, it passes through the uterus and out of your body. The extra blood and fluid in the thickened uterus lining are not needed now, so they pass out through the vagina too, in what is known as the menstrual flow. These menstrual periods are usually referred to simply as periods. You start to have periods during puberty — usually somewhere between 10 — 14 years old, but it can be earlier or later. Not all girls are the same. You continue having periods to the end of your fertile life — usually when you are about 50 years old.

Many women menstruate regularly once a month. (The word menstruation comes from a Latin word, Mensis,

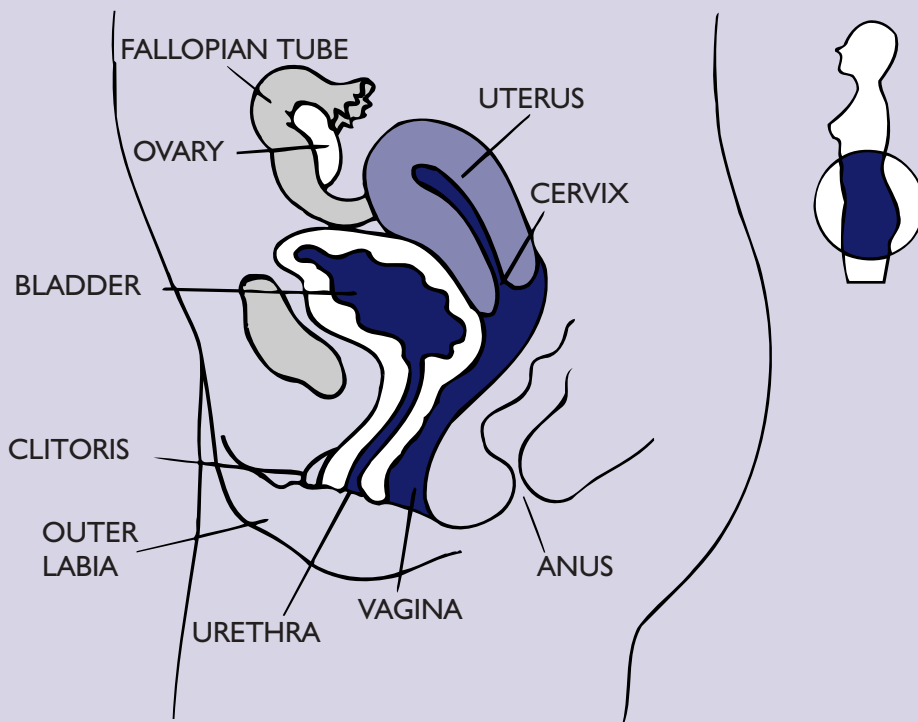
meaning month.) However, the time between periods can vary. Some women have only 20 days between periods, others might have as long as 40 days. Some women have periods that last for seven or eight days, while some only last for four days. All this is quite normal.

Some women have periods that turn up regularly like clockwork, right from the beginning. Others are never very regular. Try to get into the habit of marking the first day of each period on a calendar, or noting it somewhere. Sometimes you need to know the date of your last period, and remembering can be difficult.

You should calculate the time between periods from the first day of bleeding. Having a period once a month means that you have one month between the first day of this period, and the first day of the next one.

When you first start menstruating you may find your periods are quite erratic. You might have two or three fairly close together, then a long gap. It could be a while before you develop a regular pattern. With some periods you might lose a lot, and with others only very little. This is all normal.

FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



CONCEPTION

When a man is sexually excited, his penis becomes hard and erect and grows bigger. This is caused by extra blood flow — the penis contains no bones and is not made of muscle.

If he has a climax, or 'comes', when his penis is inside the woman's vagina, millions of sperm are released at the time of ejaculation. These propel themselves along into the uterus and the Fallopian tubes. A baby is conceived if the head of a sperm unites with an ovum and fertilises it.

Normally, an ovum is released about every 28 days — usually about 14 days before the beginning of the next period. It takes about three days for the ovum to travel through the Fallopian tube and reach the uterus.

If just one sperm enters the ovum while it is in the Fallopian tube or uterus the ovum is fertilised. The rest of the sperm can survive up to five days.

Any time you have sexual intercourse with somebody, a baby could be conceived. There are methods of contraception that can reduce the risk of this happening for people who do not want a baby yet — some methods work better than others. But no method is absolutely 100 per cent safe, so there is always a chance of a girl or woman becoming pregnant after sexual intercourse. The condom — the latex sheath which is worn over the male penis — both helps reduce the risk of pregnancy and protects against sexually transmissible diseases.

ORGASM

Orgasm is the climax of feeling which happens during sexual intercourse.

A man usually reaches this climax when he ejaculates. However, a few sperm may be released before he ejaculates, so it isn't necessary for him to climax to start a pregnancy. A woman's orgasm is not at all related to conceiving a baby either. It isn't necessary for either a man or woman to have an orgasm to start a pregnancy.

PREGNANCY

Once an ovum has been fertilised and implanted in the uterus lining, it gets its nourishment from the thickened lining.

This means the lining is not washed away, and there is no menstrual flow. For most women, the first sign of being pregnant is that menstrual periods stop.

It takes 40 weeks (nine months) for a baby to develop. During this time it remains in its mother's uterus and goes through many different stages of development.

For the first ten weeks it is called an embryo. After that, it is called a foetus.

A placenta develops too. Through the placenta, the foetus receives all the food and oxygen it needs, right through the pregnancy.

The placenta is attached to the inner wall of the uterus and it is rich in blood vessels. It is also attached to the foetus, by the umbilical cord. This cord is its lifeline. All the oxygen and nourishment the foetus needs come through the cord, which also carries away waste

products. These waste products are returned to the woman's circulatory system and are excreted through her lungs and kidneys.

During the whole pregnancy, the woman's circulatory system is quite separate from the circulatory system of the foetus. Her blood does not come into direct contact with its blood at all. Oxygen and nourishment are exchanged by diffusion — a type of two-way exchange occurring in the placenta.

THE EMBRYO

This table will give you an idea of how the baby develops during the 40 weeks of pregnancy:

Sixth week:

The embryo is 7—8 mm long (smaller than a one cent piece) and has a distinguishable head and body. Little buds begin to develop where the limbs will grow. This is the stage when the embryo is very sensitive to diseases like rubella, or chemicals such as thalidomide. The head is about a third of the total size of the embryo.

Eighth week:

The embryo is 1.3 cm long and floats in a 'watery sac' of amniotic fluid that protects it from bumps and shocks. Blood vessels can now be seen in this umbilical cord through which blood travels to and from the placenta.

THE FOETUS

Tenth week:

After the tenth week the embryo is called a foetus. It is now about 3 cm long, and real bones begin to develop to replace cartilage. Most body organs such as heart and liver have appeared but they are very immature. The foetus' eyes are sealed shut and do not open for many months.

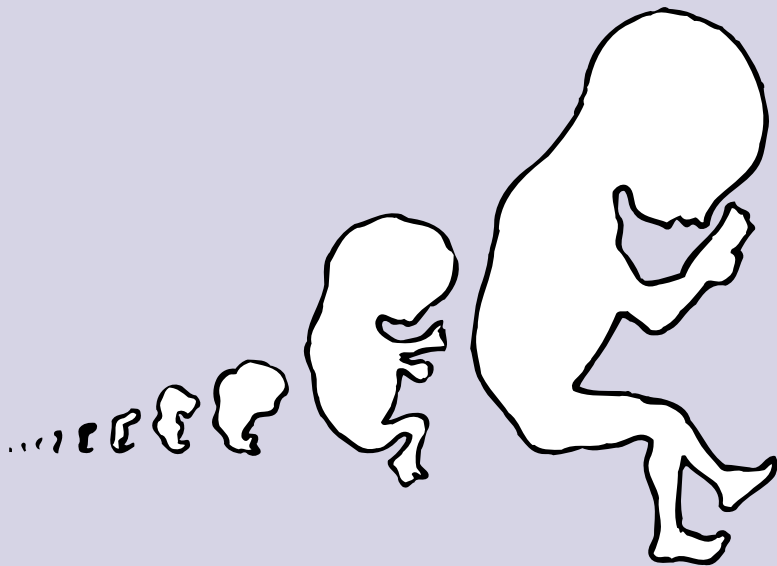
Eighteenth week:

The foetus is now about 18 cm long. It is quite active, and you can feel it kicking and stretching its arms and legs.

Thirtieth week:

The foetus is now nearly 30 cm long and hair and nails have developed. The skin has produced a creamy coating (vernix) which protects it from the effects of being immersed for so long in salty water inside its sac.

Between the thirtieth and fortieth weeks, the foetus develops and grows bigger.



THE BIRTH

The baby is born roughly 40 weeks (about 280 days) after the last period. The average baby is about 45 — 50 centimetres long and weighs between three and four kilograms. Birth begins when the powerful muscles of the uterus begin to contract — this is referred to as 'being in labour'.

These contractions become more frequent and intense as the birth gets closer. The cervix gradually opens and the vagina stretches to let the baby pass through.

As the birth gets closer, the membrane around the 'watery sac' breaks and the fluid comes away through the vagina. This usually happens before the baby is born — people call it the 'breaking of the waters'.

A baby is usually born head first. If it is born buttocks first, this is called a 'breech' birth.

AFTER THE BIRTH

After the baby has been born, the doctor or midwife ties or clamps the umbilical cord and cuts it about five centimetres from the baby. The short piece left attached to the baby dries up and usually drops off within a few days. The place where it was attached heals and becomes the navel (umbilicus or bellybutton). Shortly after the birth, the placenta and the membranes that have been surrounding the baby separate from the wall of the uterus and come away through the vagina. This is called the afterbirth.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Are 'petting' and sex-play harmful?

Not in themselves — but they can stir up sexual excitement that is hard to control.

The best rule is: never let yourself get into a situation where you feel you might be persuaded to do something that you don't want to do, or that goes against your conscience.

Is there any chance of becoming pregnant the first time you have intercourse?

Yes, if the girl has started ovulating (i.e. menstruation has started) pregnancy can occur the first time.

What are the chances of having twins?

About one in 90 pregnancies results in twins.

What causes twins to be born?

Identical twins are the result of one ovum dividing into two after it has been fertilised. Each half develops separately and two babies are born. Because they both come from the same ovum and sperm, they are always the same sex and usually look very alike.

Non-identical (i.e. 'fraternal') twins are the result of two ova being fertilised at the same time, by two different sperms. These twins can be different sexes and are no more like each other than ordinary brothers and sisters.

What makes a baby a boy or a girl?

A baby's sex is determined when it is conceived.

Each baby has two sex chromosomes — one from its mother and one from its father.

There are two types of chromosomes — for convenience, one type is called X and the other type is called Y. A woman's chromosomes are always X, so the baby always has at least one X chromosome. A man has one X and one Y chromosome.

If the sperm carries a Y chromosome, the baby has one X and one Y, and is a boy.

If the sperm carries an X chromosome, the baby has two X chromosomes and is a girl.

It is just a matter of chance, whether an X or Y chromosome fertilises the ovum.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about sex or contraception, get in touch with:

Sexual Health Helpline

Telephone: (08) 9227 6178

or 1800 198 205 (country callers)

Email: shh@fpwa-health.org.au

FPWA

70 Roe Street, NORTHBRIDGE

Telephone: (08) 9227 6177

or 1800 198 205 (country callers)

Email: sexhelp@fpwa-health.org.au

Web: <http://www.fpwa-health.org.au>

Your Local Community, School and Child Health Nurse

You can find more information on contraception, Puberty and Sexual Health on

- www.population.health.wa.gov.au
- www.thehormonefactory.com
- www.health.qld.gov.au/istaysafe

or by calling

Health Info on 1300 135 030

