

PUBERTY IN GIRLS

Puberty is one of the most important changes in anybody's life. It is the time when your reproductive organs develop.

The first sign of puberty is usually a surge of growth: you become taller; your breasts develop; hair begins to grow in the pubic area and under the arms. This may start from 10 years to 14 years — even earlier for some and later for others.

For girls, the main sign of puberty is the beginning of **menstruation** — the start of your periods.

There are other changes beside the more obvious ones taking place in your body. You can expect some changes in the way you feel about yourself and everything else in your life.

You will probably experience mood swings — partly due to all the hormonal activity, and partly because you are becoming a young adult. It takes time to get used to the idea of being a woman; there will be new sexual feelings to cope with — perhaps even the intense feeling of being 'in love'.

Some girls seem to manage these changes easily. For others, it is a time of emotional upheaval.

A WOMAN'S BODY

There are important sex differences in boys and girls long before puberty, even before birth.

Some time before puberty, important changes take place. The pituitary gland at the base of the brain begins to produce special chemicals called **hormones** which set off a chain reaction throughout the body.

These hormones are produced in both girls and boys. Without them, you wouldn't become an adult. In boys, they stimulate production of the male hormone, **testosterone**. In girls, they set off production of the main female hormone, **oestrogen**.

A woman's body is designed to enable her to bear children. It is in her body that a baby is conceived and that the **foetus** (unborn baby) is nourished and sheltered for the nine months before birth.

Female reproductive system

The **vagina** is a highly elastic passage, 8 — 10 cm long, leading to the outside of the body. It is through

the vagina that menstrual blood trickles during a period and that a baby passes at birth, and it is where intercourse takes place.

The **uterus** (womb) is a hollow, muscular, pear-shaped organ. Before pregnancy it weighs about 60 g, and measures about 9 cm long and 6 cm wide. But it is capable of enlarging to weigh 1000 g and contain a baby measuring 50 cm.



Two 10 cm **fallopian tubes** stretch one on each side, from the top of the uterus to the ovaries.

The two **ovaries** are glands which produce female sex hormones. Although only the size of an almond, each contains 150,000 to 200,000 **ova** (egg cells). Every month from puberty, the ovaries release usually only one ovum.

The **labia majora** (outer labia) are the large fleshy lips which enclose the entrance to the vagina and the urethra (the tube leading to the bladder).

The **labia minora** (inner labia) are delicate folds of skin which protect the vaginal entrance. They are usually — but not always — totally enclosed by the outer labia. The sizes of inner and outer labia vary considerably from woman to woman.

The **clitoris** is located above the urethra and is protected by a fold of the inner labia. It is usually pea-sized and, like the penis, fills with blood during sexual excitement, which can result from rubbing or stroking. The peak of this sexual excitement is known as **orgasm**.

The point where the lower part of the uterus connects with the upper part of the vagina is called the **cervix** or, sometimes, the neck of the womb. The cervix produces mucus. Around the time of ovulation, this mucus becomes clear, abundant, elastic and slippery. This assists the sperm to reach the uterus and fallopian tubes to fertilise the ovum.

Menstruation

Each month the uterus prepares for a possible pregnancy. Its lining thickens into a cushion of blood vessels, glands and liquid. If there is no fertilised **ovum** (egg) to use this nourishment, it trickles away through the vagina. The total amount of blood discharge is usually equal to 30 — 80 mL.

This regular loss is called **menstruation** (from the Latin *mensis*, month); menstruation is known most commonly as a period. A period generally lasts about five days, but sometimes as few as two or as many as eight.

The whole process of preparing the uterus lining and then disposing of it takes about a month. It is called the **menstrual cycle**. Although, on average, periods come every 28 days, this can vary. It is not uncommon for a girl's periods to be very irregular for the first two or three years. But the first day of your period is always called Day 1 of your cycle.

Conception

About 14 days before a period, an ovum is released from one of your ovaries. This is called **ovulation**.

Conception occurs around the time of ovulation. However, ovulation can be influenced by stress, illness, sexual excitement or changes in routine. Therefore, in many cases, it is difficult to predict the time when a baby is likely to be conceived.

All that is needed for conception to occur is for a **sperm** (the male contribution to making a baby) to meet an ovum in one of your fallopian tubes. When sperm and ovum join, a baby is conceived.

Sperm are produced in the male **testes**. The mixture of sperm and other fluids produced by the male reproductive system is called **semen**.

During **intercourse** (sex), when a man inserts his **penis** (male sex organ) in a woman's vagina and **ejaculates** (reaches climax, comes), 1 — 2 teaspoons of semen containing millions of sperm are released. It only takes one tiny sperm to unite with the woman's ovum for a pregnancy to begin.

You need to know that after you start menstruating (and sometimes even before) you could become pregnant if any semen at all is deposited in or just outside your vagina. It is not necessary for either of you to reach orgasm.

PERIODS

There is no way to tell when you will have your first period. It is likely to be when you are between 10 and 14 years. But it can be earlier or later — not all girls are the same.

If you have not begun to menstruate by the time you are 16, it would make sense to talk to your doctor about it. Doctors are only concerned if periods have not started by 17 years.

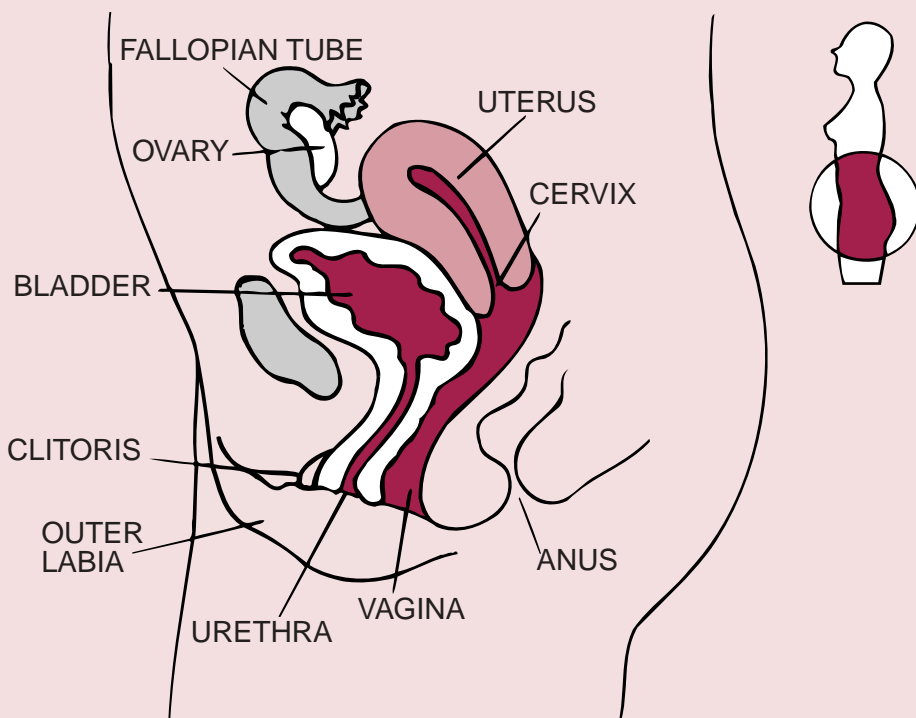
Plan ahead

On Day 1 of your first cycle, you may notice a slight brownish stain on your pants, although some girls start with more.

It's a good idea to plan ahead. You will need to decide which sanitary protection you are going to wear (see Protection section). Talk it over with your mother, community nurse or other adult you trust. Have some protection ready at home and carry one or two pads in a small cosmetic purse kept in your schoolbag.

At school, teachers and community nurses are used to coping with these events and will be able to help you if you are not prepared.

FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



What happens if your first period starts while you are at school — or on an outing — or at a party? There is often enough time to make arrangements. In an emergency, tissue or toilet paper can be a useful substitute.

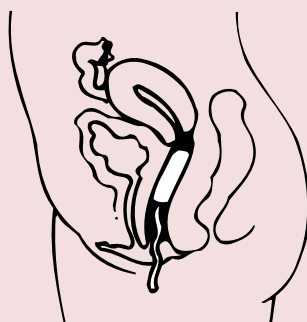
Protection

You have the choice of **sanitary napkins** (pads) worn externally, or **tampons** inserted inside the vagina.

The adhesive pads worn inside your usual pants are comfortable, reliable and not at all bulky.

Tampons are popular with many girls. They are comfortable and convenient, and allow you to do everything that you do normally — even swimming. There is a big range to choose from, including some with applicators, which may help in the beginning, and several 'slim' versions.

A TAMPON IN PLACE



But they don't suit everyone. The important thing is to use protection that is comfortable and that you feel happy with. Whatever protection you use, change frequently — every three to four hours. Menstrual flow has no odour until it meets the air, but a pad or tampon left in place too long could begin to smell and may encourage infection.

Tampons

If you use tampons, be sure to change them frequently — every four hours — and never wear them overnight.

A tampon left in place for longer than eight hours can encourage a serious infection: toxic shock syndrome (TSS).

TSS is an acute illness with sudden onset of high fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, headache, muscle pain and rash. The risk of TSS can be reduced by not using high-absorbency tampons, or by using them only intermittently during each period.

Before using tampons, read the instructions on — or in — the packet. Wash your hands before, as well as after, inserting tampons. Handle them as little as possible, store them carefully and insert them gently. Using a hand-held mirror to see what you are doing can make insertion easier.

A tampon cannot slip out accidentally if it is placed properly — nor can it get lost inside you.

Remember to leave the string hanging out — this makes removal easier.

Remember to take one tampon out before inserting another — and always remove the last one when your period is finished.

Becoming regular

When you first start to menstruate, your periods can be a bit erratic. You may have two periods in a month, then go several months without any. It can take two or three years to establish a regular pattern.

Once your cycle is established, you can expect to continue to have menstrual periods regularly until you are about 50 years. The time when a woman stops having periods is called the **menopause**.

Periods are normal

You are as fit during menstruation as at any other time, so there is no need to behave differently. You can ride, play sport, do anything you normally do. If you swim, it's best to use a tampon.

If your period is heavy, or you feel uncomfortable and don't want to be active — don't. It's up to you.

You should shower, have a bath and wash your hair as usual. In fact, the sweat glands are more active during menstruation, so personal cleanliness is more important at this time.

Minor discomforts

Girls sometimes have an uncomfortable 'draggy' feeling low in the tummy or pelvic area just before a period begins, and perhaps for the first 12 hours after it has started. Some say they feel bloated, and they can actually weigh more.

Not everybody has these symptoms, which usually disappear after the period gets under way.

Although some girls experience loose bowel motions just before a period, constipation is more common. It can usually be overcome by drinking more water, eating extra fruit (fresh or dried), vegetables, wholemeal bread and cereals, and exercising regularly. You don't need to use laxatives.

Some women and girls experience cramping and pain during their periods (**dysmenorrhoea**). These crampings may be caused by an over-supply of the hormone prostaglandin which causes the uterus to contract. If you have pain during your period, you may find the

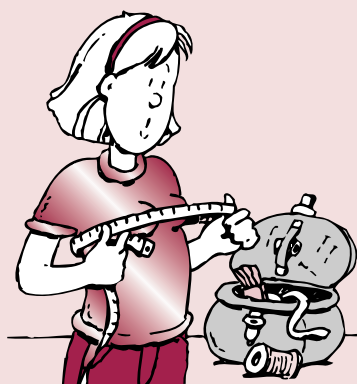
following helpful: some stretches, exercise or yoga; placing a hot water bottle over the abdomen. If these home remedies are not sufficient, you may obtain a special painkiller (obtainable from pharmacies) which works by lowering production of the hormone.

VAGINAL DISCHARGES

At puberty, the walls of the vagina thicken and **vaginal secretions** (a slight discharge) are produced. You may notice differences in the kind of secretions at different times between menstrual periods — for example, at about the time of ovulation, the mucus may be thinner, clearer, and 'stringy' and slippery like eggwhite. This is normal and healthy. The vagina is self-cleaning. Perfumed sprays are unnecessary and should be avoided.

Avoid plastic-backed panty shields. They don't allow adequate air to circulate, and so provide an ideal hot, moist breeding ground for bacteria.

Consistent, heavy vaginal discharges may indicate an infection. For instance, a thick, white and cheesy discharge with a yeasty smell is a symptom of **Candida albicans** (thrush). This is a common condition which can be treated easily. But other diseases, which may be sexually transmitted, can also cause vaginal discharge. So if you have a discharge which is unusual for you, see your doctor immediately.



THE NEW YOU

During puberty you develop your adult female shape — your hips widen slightly, your thighs become more rounded and your breasts develop.

Don't confuse this with gaining weight, even if your new, rounder figure looks plumper than it used to.

However, if you are really overweight, don't dismiss this as just puppy fat. You can mention the

problem to your doctor or community nurse. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and reduce fatty and sugary foods such as pastries and sweet biscuits. Avoid crash diets. (If you want extra information about what to eat, ring Health Promotion Services on (08) 9222 2045.)

Exercise helps your health and your figure. If you don't enjoy sport, why not try dancing or bushwalking? It is best to do something you enjoy — then you'll keep it up.

Breasts

While some girls anxiously examine their chests each day for a sign of swelling, others feel strangely top-heavy and wish they didn't have to worry about wearing a bra.

The nipple area of the breast is sexually sensitive.

If you have a baby, your breasts will produce and store the milk that is a baby's first food. Breasts vary in size, and the smaller breast fulfils its purpose just as effectively as the larger one.

Your body is unique and special, and a part of what makes you, YOU.

Acne

Acne is caused by extra activity of the tiny sebaceous glands just under the skin. These glands produce sebum — a natural oil that keeps skin supple.

The hormones that are active during puberty make the sebaceous glands grow bigger and produce extra sebum. The sebum is thicker too, and flows more slowly, so it tends to clog the pores.

Some young people don't have much acne — others are troubled by it for several years. There is no single treatment to suit everybody — what helps one type of skin may cause a flare-up in another.

Frequent gentle washing with water and a mild soap usually helps. Not because dirt has anything to do with causing acne — but washing rids skin of excess sebum.

Use an astringent (drying) face lotion, rather than one containing oil. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and less of any foods that seem to make your acne worse.

In severe cases, the doctor can give treatment that will help, or may refer you to a skin specialist.

Hair growth

Another possible problem at puberty is hair growth. Many dark-haired girls

may notice extra hair on the upper lip.

This is normal — even if a bit of an embarrassment for the time being. Sometimes it doesn't last; when hormones settle down, so does hair growth. So, it's usually best to do nothing about it at this stage.

Extreme hair removal measures can leave sensitive, angry skin that is worse than hairs that may soon disappear anyway.

If it becomes a long-lasting embarrassment, don't despair. Many women use safe ways of removing unwanted hair growth. Try talking about it with your mother, a close relative or another adult you trust.

SEXUAL FEELINGS

Sexual excitement may lead to a feeling of moisture at the entrance of the vagina. This is normal. Fluid is produced by two small glands so that, in sexual intercourse, the penis can enter the vagina without causing discomfort.

MASTURBATION

Girls masturbate by caressing or rubbing the clitoris, often until they reach orgasm.

People have different views on masturbation. However, this way of relieving sexual tension can't hurt you physically or mentally. It is normal to do it — and normal not to do it.

SEXUAL INVOLVEMENT

Adolescent girls are often physically ready for sexual relationships before they are mature enough to handle them. Don't be in a hurry. You have nothing to fear by saying 'no'. Often people in a group do things they'd prefer not to because they don't want to be different from the rest. But you don't have to act in the same way as your friends do. It's your choice.

However, if you do consider sex, keep in mind the following:

- Serious diseases can be passed from one person to another through sexual contact. These include **gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, genital warts** and **HIV** which causes **AIDS**. Saying no to sex is the only guaranteed way not to put yourself at risk. Some protection can be obtained when the male wears a **condom** (contraception in the form of a thin rubber sheath) whenever his penis is in contact with your

genital area. The risk of sexually transmissible diseases increases with the number of sex partners. See the Further Information section for places to go if you suspect you have been exposed to any of these diseases, or for more information.

- As soon as your periods start (and occasionally before) you are capable of becoming pregnant. Not having sex is the only guaranteed way to ensure this does not happen. Some protection can be obtained when the male wears a condom. For more information on condoms and other methods of contraception, see the list of agencies at the end of this leaflet.
- In Western Australia, it is against the law for anyone to have sex with a girl if either of them is under the age of 16.

FRIENDS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Maybe you feel shy and awkward with your own age group.

Around 13 and 14, girls are usually taller than boys of their own age — boys catch up later. This can make you feel even more awkward.

Try to find a group of friends who enjoy doing what you enjoy. When you are relaxed and having fun, getting on with people is easier.

LOVE

Falling in love is one of the most wonderful and exciting experiences life has to offer. It can be so exciting that it seems to take over your whole life. But, remember, most people fall in love more than once before they find a permanent partner.

Ask yourself: Is this relationship a sharing and caring one? Do you have common interests and enjoy the same activities? Are you both able to talk and listen? Do you both care about the other and the way he or she feels?

It may help to talk matters over with an adult you trust.

COMMUNICATION

Keeping communication lines open with the adults who care for you can avoid a lot of problems. As you grow and change, your relationships with different members of your family will probably change too.

To complicate matters, you'll find your mood will swing from one

extreme to the other for no apparent reason. One minute you'll feel wildly happy and on top of the world; the next, you may be down in the dumps. This is quite normal. Teenage girls and their families can find it hard to get along with each other at times. As adolescents get older, they need to take a greater role in making decisions and being responsible for themselves. This change can be difficult for parents and other adults who are used to doing these things for you. But remember too, that there are times when adolescents just don't have the understanding or experience to make sound decisions.

Views on the kind of behaviour that is acceptable can vary widely and there are no hard and fast rules. Your family's lifestyle, cultural background and religion will affect their feelings about these things and their expectations of you.

Try talking matters over with your parents. If this is really difficult it may help to ask a school counsellor or other respected adults to be present too. If you can talk about your problems, they will be easier to solve.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For health information (including sexually transmissible diseases and contraception)

HealthInfo

Telephone: 1300 135 030

FPWA

70 Roe Street, Perth.

Telephone: (08) 9227 6177.

Telephone Information Service:
(08) 9227 6178.

AIDS Line

664 Murray Street, West Perth.

Telephone: (08) 9482 0044.

Sexual assault:

13 years and over

Sexual Assault Referral Centre
PO Box 842, Subiaco WA 6008.
Telephone: (08) 9340 1828.

Under 13 years:

Princess Margaret Hospital.
Telephone: (08) 9340 8222.

Someone to talk to:

Samaritan Befrienders Youthline
Telephone: (08) 9388 2500.



Published by Population Health Division
189 Royal Street, East Perth WA 6004
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HP 2107