

Understanding Puberty

Puberty is the time when kids mature into young adults through physical and emotional changes. This doesn't happen all at once, but slowly over time. Parents often wonder how to help their child through these changes. Knowing what to expect will help you talk to your child about their changing body and answer their questions.

When Does Puberty Start?

Most females will start puberty when they're 8 to 13 years old, and most males will start between 9 and 14. But it can also be normal to start earlier or later.

Hormones from the brain trigger the start of puberty. Hormones are chemical messengers that tell the body what to do.

In males: The hormones tell the testicles to make the hormone testosterone and sperm.

In females: The hormones tell the ovaries to make the hormone estrogen and triggers the growth and release of eggs.

Other puberty hormones come from the adrenal glands, a pair of glands that sit at the top of the kidneys. These hormones lead to the growth of pubic and underarm hair, body odor, and acne.

What Physical Changes Happen During Puberty?

Males

For a male, the physical changes of puberty usually start with the testicles getting bigger. Dark, coarse, curly hair will sprout just above the penis and on the scrotum. The penis and testes will get larger, and erections happen more often. Ejaculation — the release of sperm-containing semen — also happens. Ejaculation during sleep is called a “wet dream” or nocturnal emission.

Later, hair will grow under the arms and in the beard area. And that first crack in the voice is a sign that the voice is changing and will get deeper. Some males get some breast growth (called gynecomastia). It usually goes away in 6 to 18 months.

Their body shape begins to change as their shoulders broaden and they gain weight and muscle. A growth spurt usually happens between ages 12 and 15. By age 16, most males have stopped growing, but their muscles will continue to develop.

Females

For most females, the first physical change of puberty is breast development. It starts with small, firm, tender lumps (called buds) under one or both nipples. The breasts will get larger over the next year or two. Dark, coarse, curly hair will appear on the labia (the folds of skin surrounding the vagina). Later, more hair will grow in the pubic area and under the arms.

Their body shape begins to change as their hips widen and they gain weight and body fat. Expect the first period (menstruation) about 2 years after breast buds appear, usually between the ages of 9 and 16. Most females have a growth spurt about 1–2 years before their period starts. After they get their period, most females grow about 1–2 more inches before growth stops.

What Emotional Changes Happen During Puberty?

The emotional changes of puberty can be challenging for kids and their parents. Try to support your child and not take it personally as they go through these changes. Your child may:

- be very focused on the way they look and dress
- care a lot about what their peers think about them
- become moodier
- want more privacy
- focus more on their friends rather than family
- show less affection toward parents

This is also the time when kids feel more peer pressure. Talk to your child about choices they will face about drinking, smoking, drugs, and sex. They might not seem like they're listening, but your opinions and choices do matter.

Watch for signs that your child may need your help. Puberty can be a time when things like anxiety, depression, and eating disorders show up. Talk to your child about strong feelings and help them develop ways to deal with stress. Talk to your doctor right away if your child seems very sad or stressed, has changes in appetite or diet, loses interest in things they used to enjoy, talks about hurting themselves, or has any other changes that worry you.

Common Puberty Concerns

As kids mature, they may have questions or concerns about the changes they're going through. Common puberty concerns include:

- **Body odor.** Your child should bathe or shower regularly. Using deodorant or antiperspirant can help.
- **Acne.** Remind your child to wash their face once or twice a day with a mild soap or gentle cleanser and warm water.
- **Penis size.** Boys should know that there's a wide range of normal penis sizes.
- **Breast size.** Breasts come in a variety of shapes and sizes. It's also common for one breast to be larger than the other.
- **Erections and ejaculation.** Erections can happen spontaneously without sexual fantasies or touching. Ejaculations can happen during masturbation or as a nocturnal emission (a wet dream).
- **Masturbation.** Masturbation is a way for kids and teens to explore their bodies and discover their sexuality. It is a normal part of growing up.
- **Vaginal discharge.** Girls may notice thin, clear, or whitish discharge on their underpants 6 months to a year before they get their periods. A change in color, itchiness, or unpleasant odor may be signs of an infection.

- **Weight gain.** Some kids struggle with their physical appearance as it changes during puberty. Be sensitive to talk about self-esteem and body satisfaction.
- **Questions about gender.** Some kids may feel unsure about what gender means to them. Your child may want to explore these feelings with you, your pediatrician, or a counselor.
- **Strong emotions.** Encourage your child to talk about their feelings. Help them find ways to handle strong emotions and mood swings, such as breathing, meditation, exercise, writing, or art.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

All kids go through puberty differently. But talk to your doctor if:

- Your son shows signs of puberty before age 9.
- Your daughter shows signs of puberty before age 7.
- Your daughter does not show any signs of puberty by age 13.
- Your daughter has not had her period within 5 years of when her breasts started to grow.
- Your daughter has not had her period by age 16.
- Your son does not show any signs of puberty by age 14.
- Your child has a strong desire to be another gender (gender dysphoria).

Also call the doctor if you're worried that your child:

- is very anxious, stressed, or depressed
- is drinking, doing drugs, smoking, or having unsafe sex
- may hurt themselves or someone else

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