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Everything You Wanted to Know About Puberty

More Than a Funny Word

OK, so it's a funny word . . . but what **is** puberty, anyway? Puberty is the name for when your body begins to develop and change. During puberty, your body will grow faster than any other time in your life, except for when you were an infant. Back then, your body was growing rapidly and you were learning new things — you'll be doing these things and much more during puberty. Except this time, you won't have diapers or a rattle and you'll have to dress yourself!

It's good to know about the changes that come along with puberty before they happen, and it's really important to remember that everybody goes through it. No matter where you live, whether you're a guy or a girl, or whether you like hip-hop or country music, you will experience the changes that occur during puberty. No two people are exactly alike. But one thing all adults have in common is they made it through puberty.

Time to Change

When your body reaches a certain age, your brain releases a special hormone that starts the changes of puberty. It's called gonadotropin-releasing hormone, or GnRH for short. When GnRH reaches the pituitary gland (a pea-shaped gland that sits just under the brain), this gland releases into the bloodstream two more puberty hormones: luteinizing hormone (LH for short) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH for short). Guys and girls have both of these hormones in their bodies. And depending on whether you're a guy or a girl, these hormones go to work on different parts of the body.

For guys, these hormones travel through the blood and give the testes the signal to begin the production of testosterone and sperm. Testosterone is the hormone that causes most of the changes in a guy's body during puberty. Sperm cells must be produced for men to reproduce.

In girls, FSH and LH target the ovaries, which contain eggs that have been there since birth. The hormones stimulate the ovaries to begin producing another hormone called estrogen. Estrogen, along with FSH and LH, causes a girl's body to mature and prepares her for pregnancy.

So that's what's really happening during puberty — it's all these new chemicals moving around inside your body, turning you from a teen into an adult with adult levels of hormones.

Puberty usually starts some time between age 8 and 13 in girls and 10 and 15 in guys. Some people start puberty a bit earlier or later, though. Each person is a little different, so everyone starts and goes through puberty on his or her body's own schedule. This is one of the reasons why some of your friends might still look like kids, whereas others look more like adults.

It Doesn't Hurt . . . It's Just a Growth Spurt

"Spurt" is the word used to describe a short burst of activity, something that happens in a hurry. And a **growth spurt** is just that: Your body is growing, and it's happening really fast! When you enter puberty, it might seem like your sleeves are always getting shorter and your pants always look like you're ready for a flood — that's because you're experiencing a major growth spurt. It lasts for about 2 to 3 years. When that growth spurt is at its peak, some people grow 4 or more inches in a year.

This growth during puberty will be the last time your body grows taller. After that, you will be at your adult height. But your height isn't the only thing that will be changing.

Taking Shape

As your body grows taller, it will change in other ways, too. You will gain weight, and as your body becomes heavier, you'll start to notice changes in its overall shape. Guys' shoulders will grow wider, and their bodies will become more muscular. Their voices will become deeper. For some guys, the breasts may grow a bit, but for most of them this growth goes away by the end of puberty.

Guys will notice other changes, too, like the lengthening and widening of the penis and the enlargement of the testes. All of these changes mean that their bodies are developing as expected during puberty.

Girls' bodies usually become curvier. They gain weight on their hips, and their breasts develop, starting with just a little swelling under the nipple. Sometimes one breast might develop more quickly than the other, but most of the time they soon even out. With all this growing and developing going on, girls will notice an increase in body fat and occasional soreness under the nipples as the breasts start to enlarge — and that's normal.

Gaining some weight is part of developing into a woman, and it's unhealthy for girls to go on a diet to try to stop this normal weight gain. If you ever have questions or concerns about your weight, talk it over with your doctor.

Usually about 2 to 2½ years after girls' breasts start to develop, they get their first menstrual period. This is one more thing that lets a girl know puberty is progressing and the puberty

hormones have been doing their job. Girls have two ovaries, and each ovary holds thousands of eggs. During the menstrual cycle, one of the eggs comes out of an ovary and begins a trip through the fallopian tube, ending up in the uterus (the uterus is also called the womb).

Before the egg is released from the ovary, the uterus has been building up its lining with extra blood and tissue. If the egg is fertilized by a sperm cell, it stays in the uterus and grows into a baby, using that extra blood and tissue to keep it healthy and protected as it's developing.

Most of the time, though, the egg is only passing through. When the egg doesn't get fertilized, the uterus no longer needs the extra blood and tissue, so it leaves the body through the vagina as a menstrual period. A period usually lasts from 5 to 7 days, and about 2 weeks after the start of the period a new egg is released, which marks the middle of each cycle.

Hair, Hair, Everywhere

Well, maybe not everywhere. But one of the first signs of puberty is hair growing where it didn't grow before. Guys and girls both begin to grow hair under their arms and in their pubic areas (on and around the genitals). It starts out looking light and sparse. Then as you go through puberty, it becomes longer, thicker, heavier, and darker. Eventually, guys also start to grow hair on their faces.

About Face

Another thing that comes with puberty is acne, or pimples. Acne is triggered by puberty hormones. Pimples usually start around the beginning of puberty and can stick around during adolescence (the teen years). You may notice pimples on your face, your upper back, or your upper chest. It helps to keep your skin clean, and your doctor will be able to offer some suggestions for clearing up acne. The good news about acne is that it usually gets better or disappears by the end of adolescence.

Putting the P.U. in Puberty

A lot of teens notice that they have a new smell under their arms and elsewhere on their bodies when they enter puberty, and it's not a pretty one. That smell is body odor, and everyone gets it. As you enter puberty, the puberty hormones affect glands in your skin, and the glands make chemicals that smell bad. These chemicals put the *scent* in adolescent!

So what can you do to feel less stinky? Well, keeping clean is a good way to lessen the smell. You might want to take a shower every day, either in the morning before school, or the night before. Using deodorant (or deodorant with antiperspirant) every day can help keep body odor in check, too.

There's More?

Guys and girls will also notice other body changes as they enter puberty, and they're all normal changes. Girls might see and feel a white, mucous-like discharge from the vagina. This doesn't mean anything is wrong — it is just another sign of your changing body and hormones.

Guys will start to get erections (when the penis fills with blood and becomes hard). Erections happen when guys fantasize and think about sexual things or sometimes for no reason at all. They may experience something called nocturnal emissions (or wet dreams), when the penis becomes erect while a guy is sleeping and he ejaculates. When a guy ejaculates, semen comes out of the penis — semen is a fluid that contains sperm. That's why they're called wet dreams — they happen when you're sleeping and your underwear or the bed might be a little wet when you wake up. Wet dreams become less frequent as guys progress through puberty, and they eventually stop. Guys will also notice that their voices may "crack" and eventually get deeper.

Change Can Feel Kind of Strange

Just as those hormones create changes in the way your body looks on the outside, they also create changes on the inside. While your body is adjusting to all the new hormones, so is your mind. During puberty, you might feel confused or have strong emotions that you've never experienced before. You may feel anxious about how your changing body looks.

You might feel overly sensitive or become easily upset. Some teens lose their tempers more than usual and get angry at their friends or families.

Sometimes it can be difficult to deal with all of these new emotions. Usually people aren't trying to hurt your feelings or upset you on purpose. It might not be your family or friends making you angry — it might be your new "puberty brain" trying to adjust. And while the adjustment can feel difficult in the beginning, it will gradually become easier. It can help to talk to someone and share the burden of how you're feeling — a friend or, even better, a parent, older sibling, or adult who's gone through it all before.

You might have new, confusing feelings about sex — and lot of questions. The adult hormones estrogen and testosterone are signals that your body is giving you new responsibilities, like the ability to create a child. That's why it's important to get all your questions answered.

It's easy to feel embarrassed or anxious when talking about sex, but you need to be sure you have all the right information. Some teens can talk to their parents about sex and get all their questions answered. But if you feel funny talking to your parents about sex, there are many other people to talk to, like your doctor, a school nurse, a teacher, a school counselor, or another adult you feel comfortable talking with.

Developing Differently

People are all a little different from one another, so it makes sense that they don't all develop in the same way. No two people are at exactly the same stage as they go through puberty, and

everyone changes at his or her own pace. Some of your friends may be getting curves, whereas you don't have any yet. Maybe your best friend's voice has changed, and you think you still sound like a kid with a high, squeaky voice. Or maybe you're sick of being the tallest girl in your class or the only boy who has to shave.

But eventually everyone catches up, and the differences between you and your friends will even out. It's also good to keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to look. That's what makes us human — we all have qualities that make us unique, on the inside and the outside.

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