

# Understanding Puberty in Girls: For Parents and Caregivers

Puberty is the time when a child's body starts to grow and change into an adult body. For girls, this means changes in how the body looks and works, including starting periods and growing breasts. Most girls start puberty between the ages of 8 and 13, but it can start earlier or later. Every child is different.

Puberty starts when the brain tells the body to make more hormones. Hormones are chemical messengers that help control how the body grows and develops. In girls, the hormone estrogen plays a big role in these changes.

Puberty is a normal part of growing up, but sometimes changes can happen too early, too late, or come with other problems. If you are ever unsure or worried, it is always best to reach out to your child's care team for help.

Puberty can bring big changes to your child's body and emotions. You may feel unsure about how to help. That is OK. You are not alone. Talking with your child's care team or other parents and caregivers can give you ideas and support. Your kindness, calmness, and attention make a big difference to your child during this time.



## Signs of Puberty

These are some common signs that your child is going through puberty:

- Breast development
- Growth of body hair on the underarms, legs, and pubic area
- A growth spurt
- Body odor
- Oily skin or acne
- Periods start, also called menstruation
- Mood changes, including feeling more emotional

## Menstrual Periods

When puberty starts, the brain tells the body to start releasing eggs from the ovaries. The uterus builds up a lining each month to prepare for a possible pregnancy. If the egg is not fertilized, the lining of the uterus leaves the body during a period. This is called menstruation.

- Periods are often irregular at first. They may be light or heavy. They may skip a month or bleed more in some months. This is usually normal.
- Some girls may feel tired, have cramps, or feel moody during their period.
- Most periods last 3 to 7 days.
- Over time, periods usually become more regular. They may happen every 21 to 35 days. You can help your child track her cycle on a calendar or period-tracking app on her phone so she knows when to expect her period.

## Period Supplies

One way you can support your child as she deals with this new experience is to make sure she has the supplies she needs. She can decide which option is most comfortable for her.

She will need to have these at home and also be able to take them to school. If your child is still in elementary school, you may want to talk to her teacher to make sure she has access to a bathroom and supplies during the school day.

Some options are:

- **Pads:** These are the easiest to use and often the best option for younger girls. They stick to the underwear to catch the blood. They come in different lengths and thicknesses, so your child can pick the ones that are comfortable for her. They should be changed as needed during the day. This can be every 4 to 8 hours or sooner. Some pads are made extra thick or long to last overnight and help prevent leaks. Some are very small or thin and can be called a liner or pantyliner. Your child can use these in the days before she expects her period, as well as at the end.
- **Tampons:** These go inside the vagina to catch the blood before it comes out. It takes some time and practice to learn how to use them. Some have a cardboard or plastic “applicator” that helps put them in. Some do not have applicators. Generally, tampons must be changed every 4 to 6 hours. Do not leave tampons in for longer than 8 hours. A rare but life-threatening infection called toxic shock syndrome can happen.
- **Period underwear:** These look like regular underwear but can hold period blood. With light to moderate bleeding, period underwear can be used without a pad or tampon. With heavy bleeding, they can be used as a backup for a tampon, menstrual cup, or menstrual disc. Your child may need 3 to 10 pairs of these for a period. They are easy to use and are reusable after washing but can be expensive to buy initially.
- **Menstrual cup:** A menstrual cup is a reusable, bell-shaped silicone or rubber device that is put into the vagina to collect blood before it comes out. Cups come in different sizes. They can take time and practice to learn how to use and may be better for older girls. A cup can be worn for up to 12 hours. When it is full, it is emptied into the toilet, cleaned in the sink, and reinserted.
- **Menstrual disc:** This works in a similar way to a menstrual cup, but it sits higher in the vagina. The disc covers the cervix. Inserting and removing it can take practice. Like the cup, the disc can be worn for up to 12 hours. Menstrual discs can be reusable or disposable.



Tampons, pads, menstrual discs, and menstrual cups are options for managing period flow.

## Cramps

Cramps are pains in the lower belly. They happen when the uterus tightens to push out the lining. Girls and teens tend to have stronger cramps because their bodies are still adjusting. Heating pads and over-the-counter pain medicine can help.

## Sexual Health

Sexual health is an important topic as your child grows into the teen years. Sexual health means keeping her body safe and making good choices about sex and relationships.

Your care team can share resources, such as trustworthy websites, books, or classes, to help you learn how to talk about these issues.

Here are some ways you can support your child to develop positive sexual health:

- **Have honest conversations:** Once a girl starts getting her period, she can become pregnant if she has sex. It may seem too soon to talk about these issues, but she needs to understand how her body works. Depending on the age of your child, talk about changes in sexual feelings, safe sex, consent, and respecting partners.
- **Use age-appropriate language:** Make sure explanations match the child's understanding.
- **Share values:** Talk about family values and expectations around relationships, intimacy, and responsibility.



Let your child know she can always come to you with questions. Your support helps her build healthy, respectful relationships.

## Mental and Social Changes

Puberty brings changes in how girls think, feel, and act. This is normal. You may notice your child:

- **Has mood swings:** Shifts between feeling happy, sad, angry, or excited can happen quickly. Hormone changes make feelings stronger. Let her know that exercise, such as walking, dancing, or biking, can help improve her mood.
- **Needs independence:** Girls may want more privacy and ask to make more of their own decisions. They may spend more time with friends than family, and care more about friends' opinions.
- **Feels sexual attraction:** Teen girls may start to have crushes or feel physical attraction, which is a normal part of growing up.
- **Has self-esteem changes:** Your child may become more worried about body image, popularity, or fitting in at this time. She may compare herself to others more often.
- **Thinks more about the future:** Girls may start to consider their own personal goals, beliefs, and values.

Most girls do not need therapy or counseling, but if your child seems very sad, anxious, or confused, talking to a counselor can help. Your care team can give you resources if you need to find mental health care.

Remember that support and kindness from parents and caregivers help girls feel more confident during these changes.



## How Your Care Team Can Help

Most girls do not need any special tests for puberty. Your care team may:

- Ask about growth and health history
- Do a physical exam to check normal development
- Ask questions about periods or any worries your child may have

If puberty starts very early or very late, the care team may order blood tests or imaging to check hormone levels.

## Support at Home

### Medicines

Most girls do not need medicine for puberty. If your child has bad cramps during periods, your care team may suggest acetaminophen, like Tylenol®, or ibuprofen, like Advil® or Motrin®, to help with pain. Talk to the care team first if your child takes blood thinners, has a history of bleeding or stomach ulcers, or has a history of kidney or liver disease.

### Healthy Habits

To help your child feel better, help her start these healthy habits:



- **Healthy eating:** A balanced diet gives your child energy for growing and supports a healthy period cycle.
- **Good sleep:** Regular sleep helps with growth, mood, and focus in school. Most girls need 8 to 10 hours each night.
- **Daily hygiene:** Bathing and using deodorant help manage new body odors.
- **Physical activity:** Movement and play help lower stress and keep the body strong.

## More Ways to Be Supportive

- **Listen openly:** Be ready to listen without interrupting or judging. Allow girls to share their thoughts and worries.
- **Give clear, accurate information:** Use real medical facts to explain body changes and emotions.
- **Encourage healthy habits:** Support regular exercise, good sleep, and healthy eating.
- **Respect privacy:** Let girls have personal space while staying involved in their lives.
- **Model positive behavior:** Set examples of respect, healthy relationships, and self-care.
- **Normalize feelings:** Remind girls that it is OK to feel emotional and that asking for help is a strength. Be patient, and talk to your child about healthy ways to deal with feelings.



## **When to Contact Your Child's Care Team**

Call the care team if your child has:

- Signs of puberty such as breast growth or pubic hair before age 8, or no signs of puberty by age 13
- Very heavy periods, such as soaking through a pad or tampon every 1 to 2 hours, or periods that last more than 7 days
- Severe mood swings, sadness, or anxiety that do not get better or that affect daily life
- Persistent stomach pain, headaches, or other aches that do not improve with over-the-counter medicine
- Unexplained weight loss or gain, or big changes in appetite
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping much more or much less than usual

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's development or behavior, call the care team.

## **When to Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room**

Get help right away if your child:

- Has severe chest pain, trouble breathing, or shortness of breath
- Has sudden, severe stomach pain
- Has uncontrolled bleeding that will not stop, such as very heavy vaginal bleeding with weakness or fainting
- Faints, passes out, or cannot be woken up easily
- Is very confused, has trouble speaking, or has sudden changes in behavior or mental state
- Has signs of a severe allergic reaction, such as swelling of the face, lips, tongue, or throat, or trouble breathing





## **Thank You for Choosing Us**

Thank you for trusting us with your child's care. We are here to support you and want you and your child to feel your best. Contact us with any questions.

**IF YOU HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, CALL 911 OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.**

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.

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