

# PUBERTY

## FACT SHEET

### What is puberty?

**Puberty is often recognised as a transition from childhood to adulthood. Puberty occurs as a result of hormonal changes. The main hormones involved in puberty are oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone.**

Puberty usually starts between the ages of 8 and 16 years and can last anywhere from 18 months to 5 years.

Although experiences of puberty vary widely, most changes are experienced by everyone, but to different degrees. If you're worried or struggling, seek help from an adult you trust, a doctor or a support service.

Everyone is assigned a sex at birth based on what their body looks like, and most people will be assigned male or female. However, about 1.7 percent of the population are intersex and have bodies that are more diverse than stereotypical definitions of male and female.

A person's biological sex will determine their bodily experience of puberty. Lots of changes are common across all people, but others are more typical for most females or males.

As well as being assigned a sex at birth, everyone develops a gender identity. Most people match with their sex assigned at birth (cisgender), while other people may not match and identify as another gender (transgender).

### Physical changes

Most people experience physical changes during puberty. Individuals may experience some or all of the following:

#### Changes to body hair

- Leg and arm hair thickens
- Underarm hair and pubic hair develops
- Chest, back, shoulder and facial hair may develop

Whilst you may experience pressure to remove certain hair, all of this hair is normal and healthy.

#### Oil glands become more active

- Increased pimples
- Oily/greasy hair

Regular washing can help. If you are worried about acne, see a GP or dermatologist to discuss treatment options.

#### Sweat glands are more active

- Increased perspiration/sweat and body odour

Regular washing of clothes and the body (particularly underarms and genitals) will reduce odour. Soap and deodorant can help with upper body odour. However genitals should be washed with warm water only and hygiene products should be avoided.

#### Body shape changes

- Increased height and growth spurts
- Weight gain
- Shoulders and chest get broader
- Hips and thighs may grow wider
- Stretch marks

Although media often gives the impression that there are ideal body shapes, all bodies are different. If you are worried about serious weight gain or body changes, it's important to get advice from a doctor.

### Voice changes

- Voice gets deeper

This can be more noticeable in most males, and is a gradual process. The voice may alternate between squeaky and deep until it settles down.

### Emotional changes

Sometimes your emotions can be all over the place due to changing hormones. You may have positive feelings like happiness and joy one moment, but then sadness or anger the next. This can be really confusing and frustrating for you and the people around you. Communicating the fluctuations in your mood with the people close to you can help to reduce this confusion and maintain positive relationships. To help with mood swings and emotions, it is important to get enough sleep. Regular exercise can also be helpful, along with self-help strategies such as mindfulness, meditation or engaging in your favourite activities.

### Sexual feelings

During puberty you might start having sexual feelings and thoughts. These thoughts may be about specific people, or more general in nature. Some people don't experience any sexual feelings. Sexual feelings may include sensitive skin, erections, wetness, sexual thoughts and feeling excited.

### Masturbation

Touching or rubbing your own genital area so that it feels good is called masturbation. Masturbation can also lead to orgasm; muscular contractions in the genitals accompanied by feelings of pleasure. Masturbation is a normal behaviour but a private activity and must only be done in a private place such as in your bedroom or bathroom. Masturbation can be a healthy way of experiencing pleasure and learning about your body.

## Erections

When erectile tissue in the penis or the clitoris is engorged with blood, it becomes hard/stiff. This is called an erection. When you reach puberty you may experience more frequent erections. This is a normal and healthy part of growing up. Sometimes erections may happen for no obvious reason and at an unexpected time or place such as at school, in a bus or when out with friends. Because it is larger and more visible than an erect clitoris, an erect penis can cause embarrassment. It is useful to have strategies for dealing with unwanted erections, such as thinking of something really boring or wearing clothes that make erections less noticeable. Remember erections are a normal part of puberty.

## Penis and testes

During puberty, the size and shape of genitals change. The skin of the scrotum generally darkens and becomes more wrinkled. The testes and penis grow, with the penis usually growing longer and then thickening.

**Sperm** are reproductive cells and are contained in whitish fluid called **semen**. At puberty, sperm begin to be produced in the testicles. **Ejaculation** is when semen comes out of an erect penis during orgasm. Urine also leaves the body through the penis, but never at the same time as semen.

## Wet dreams

A wet dream is when a penis ejaculates semen or a vagina discharges a lubricating fluid. Some people have wet dreams only occasionally, while for others they may happen often. It is a normal part of growing up and can be easily cleaned with a cloth and washing underwear, pyjamas and sheets.

## Breasts

Breast changes are common during puberty and are often more significant for females. Anyone can experience nipple tenderness/swelling and an increase in areola size (the skin around the nipples). Sometimes growing breasts can cause lumps or tenderness. The size and shape of breasts differs for everyone, and usually a person does not have two identical breasts. If you have concerns, talk to someone you trust or a doctor.

## Vagina and vulva

During puberty, the size and shape of genitals change. As part of the vulva, the labia minora grow larger, and often darken in colour. Just like with other body parts there is a wide range of what is normal.

The vagina is the internal canal between the uterus and the vaginal opening. At puberty, **vaginal discharge** often begins. This can vary in colour, amount and consistency. Discharge also varies throughout the menstrual cycle, and with sexual arousal/activity. Some people produce a lot of discharge and others do not.

**Periods** start during puberty. A period occurs roughly once a month, when the lining of the uterus leaves the body through the vagina as menstrual blood. Periods are healthy and normal, but can take some getting used to. Periods are often irregular when they first start, but it can be helpful to track their timing so that you know when they will happen. There are many options for catching/absorbing menstrual blood. Some discomfort can be normal, but seek help for severe or ongoing pain. Periods can also vary in the amount of blood flow. Generally if you are changing a pad or tampon 6 times a day for 4-5 days or having a period lasting longer than 7 days this is considered heavy menstrual bleeding and you should seek help.

To learn more about the menstrual cycle, see our **Menstrual Cycle Fact Sheet**.

## Further information

You can find more information about puberty on the following websites. If you have concerns or questions, you can also contact the SHINE SA Sexual Healthline or make an appointment with SHINE SA.

- Body Talk  
[www.bodytalk.org.au](http://www.bodytalk.org.au)
- Kids Helpline  
[www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/mood-swings](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/mood-swings)

CONTACT  
SHINE SA

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### Clinic & Counselling Appointments and General Enquiries

Tel 8300 5300

Clinic locations and times are available at [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

### Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.

Available 9:00am – 12:30pm, Monday – Friday

### National Relay Service

[www.relayservice.gov.au](http://www.relayservice.gov.au)

133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)