



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists

FAQ

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ041
ESPECIALLY FOR TEENS

Growing Up

- **What happens to girls' bodies during puberty?**
- **What changes occur in the breasts?**
- **What changes occur in the reproductive organs?**
- **When will I begin having menstrual periods?**
- **How can I keep track of my menstrual periods?**
- **What do I need to do before and during my menstrual period?**
- **What discomforts can I expect during my periods?**
- **What can I do to stay healthy as my body grows?**
- **How can I reduce acne?**
- **What kinds of problems should I talk to my doctor about?**
- **Glossary**

What happens to girls' bodies during puberty?

As you reach **puberty**, a part of your brain tells your sex glands—your **ovaries**—to start working. The sex glands then signal other parts of your body to start to grow. These signals are carried by hormones. Hormones are made by your body to control its functions. They cause your body to change and start being more like an adult:

- Your breasts grow.
- You gain weight and grow taller.
- Your hips may get wider.
- You grow hair under your arms and around the **vulva**.
- Your body odor may change.
- You may get acne or pimples.

What changes occur in the breasts?

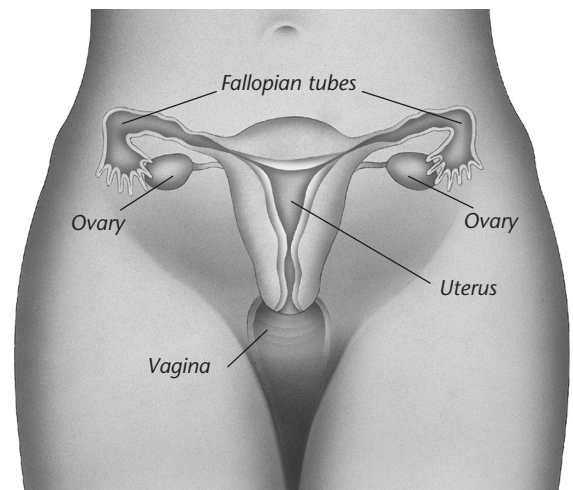
You might notice a change in your breasts first. They start to look as if the darker areas around the nipples (called the areolas) are swelling. The breasts also grow rounder and fuller. One breast may even seem a little larger than the other, and they may feel sore at times. This is normal.

What changes occur in the reproductive organs?

Hormones also cause changes that prepare a girl's body to be able to have a baby. The ovaries contain eggs, and when a girl matures, one egg is released each month. This is called ovulation.

The egg then moves into one of the **fallopian tubes**. At the same time, the lining of tissue builds up in the **uterus**. If the egg has not been fertilized, the lining of the uterus is shed during **menstruation** (your menstrual period).

Female Reproductive System



When will I begin having menstrual periods?

There is no way to tell when you will have your first period. The average age is 12 years, but it can happen earlier or later. The first period is usually very light—only a few drops of blood. Periods usually last between 3 days and 7 days and happen about once a month.

When you first start having periods, they may not be regular. There may be times when you miss a period. You may have two periods in 1 month. This is normal. It can take a while for your body to get on a regular pattern.

How can I keep track of my menstrual periods?

Mark an “X” on the calendar on the first day your period starts. Count the first “X” as day 1. Keep counting the days until you have your next period. If you do this every month, you will be able to tell how many days there are between your periods. Some girls will have a period every 28 days. For others, it may be anywhere from 21 to 45 days during the first few years after their periods start. For some girls, it may change from month to month. Even when your periods start to be more regular, you may miss a period or be a few days early or late. If you have had sex, a missed period can be a sign that you are pregnant.

What do I need to do before and during my menstrual period?

It is best to plan ahead and be prepared for your period. Have pads or tampons ready at home and carry them with you to school. Pads are attached to the inside of your underwear. They absorb the blood as it leaves the vagina. Tampons are worn inside the vagina to catch the flow before it leaves the body. If you cannot decide whether to use a pad or tampon, talk with your mother, school nurse, or another adult you trust.

You should change your pad or tampon at least every 4 hours. On the first days of your period, you may need to change it more often because your flow may be heavier.

Do not leave a tampon in your vagina for more than 8 hours because that can lead to an infection called toxic shock syndrome. You also may want to avoid using scented tampons and pads because they can cause irritation.

What discomforts can I expect during my periods?

Many girls have cramps (a feeling of tightness and pain) in the lower abdomen and back at the start of their menstrual periods. Some girls also get headaches, dizziness, diarrhea, or nausea. This is normal. To help ease cramps, you can

- take ibuprofen or naproxen sodium
- exercise
- place a heating pad on your abdomen

What can I do to stay healthy as my body grows?

Your body needs nutrients to grow. Eating a balanced diet will help keep you healthy. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables and drink lots of milk. Make sure to eat foods and drink fluids that contain plenty of calcium. You need at least 1,300 mg of calcium each day to build strong bones. Also, avoid eating too much fast food, which is loaded with fat and sugar.

Getting regular exercise can make your muscles and bones stronger and give you more energy. It also can help decrease menstrual cramps.

How can I reduce acne?

Acne is caused by glands under the skin that produce a natural oil called sebum. Puberty makes these glands produce extra sebum, which can clog the pores in your skin.

Washing your face often with water and mild cleanser usually helps get rid of the excess sebum in your pores. This will help reduce pimples and acne. Avoid products that dry or irritate your skin. Do not scrub or pick at your skin. If you have concerns about acne or pimples, there are medications that can help.

What kinds of problems should I talk to my doctor about?

Talk to your doctor about your menstrual period if

- you are aged 15 years and have not had a menstrual period
- your periods were regular and occurred monthly and then they became irregular
- your period occurs more often than every 21 days or less often than every 45 days
- your periods occur 90 days apart (even if only for one cycle)
- your periods last more than 7 days
- your periods require frequent pad or tampon changes (soaking more than one every 1–2 hours)

Glossary

Fallopian Tubes: Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

Menstruation: The blood and tissue that comes from the uterus each month when an egg is not fertilized (also called your period).

Ovaries: Two glands, located on either side of the uterus, that contain the eggs released at ovulation and produce hormones.

Puberty: The stage of life when the reproductive organs become functional and secondary sex characteristics develop.

Uterus: A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

Vulva: The external female genitalia.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ041: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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