

Girls and Puberty



Cheryl, aged 11.

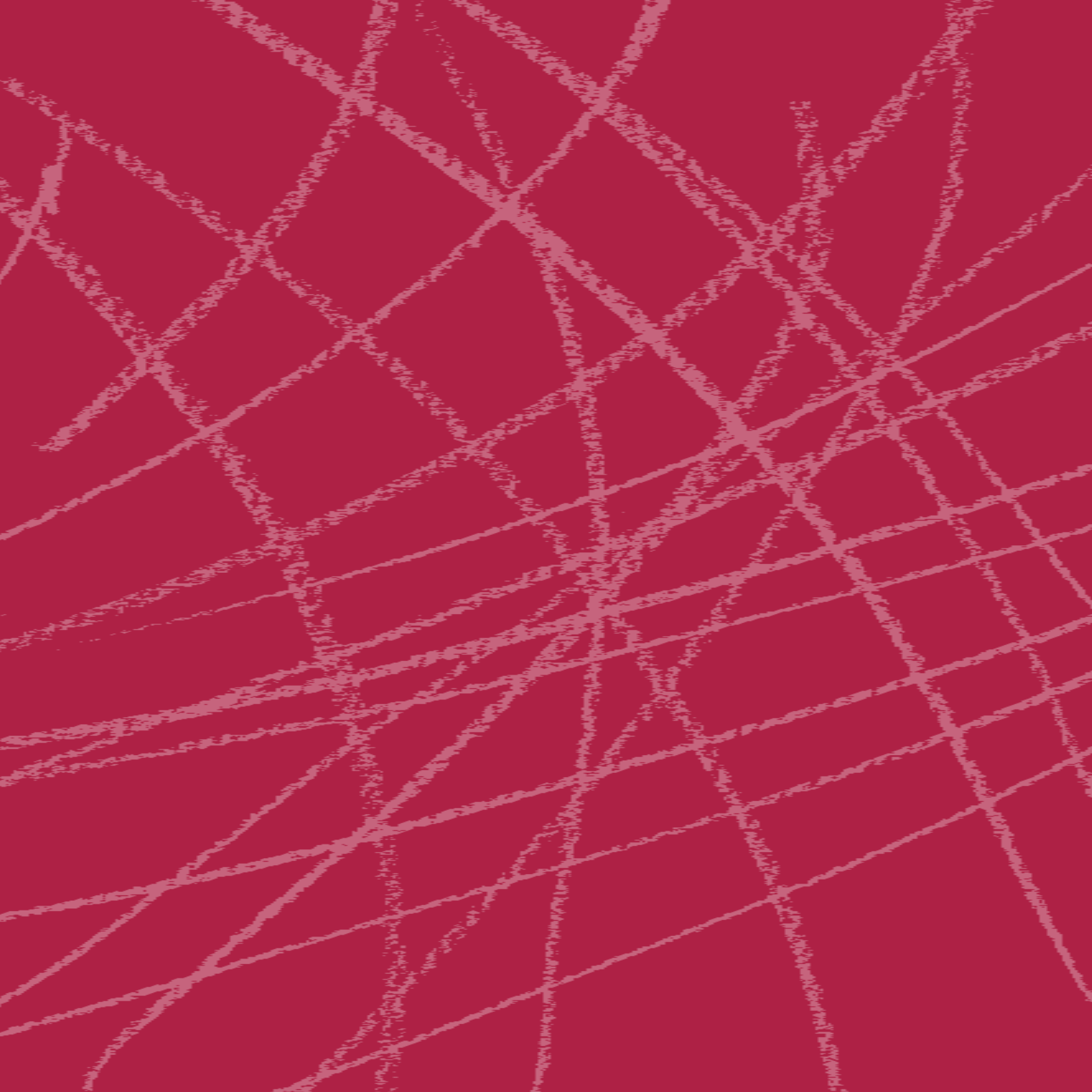


Beryl, aged 14.

77- RLL

almost

EVERYTHING GIRLS WILL EVER NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT BODY CHANGES AND OTHER STUFF!



In this booklet, we've got together a heap of information so that you can be informed about the important stuff. And that will help keep you safe and happy and well.

(PS: If you want to know what boys go through, have a look at the Boys and Puberty booklet.)

Do butterflies get homework too?

Human beings are complex things. When you're at school, you're expected to get your homework handed in on time and go through puberty too. Compared to us, caterpillars have it easy. They spin a cocoon around themselves and then, bingo! A few weeks later, they emerge as butterflies. Or maybe a moth. Whereas kids have to go from being kids to adults and learn about the mysterious 'facts of life' on that journey. Your body changes, but you don't get to stay in a cocoon while it's happening.

Is it just me, or have I arrived on a new planet?

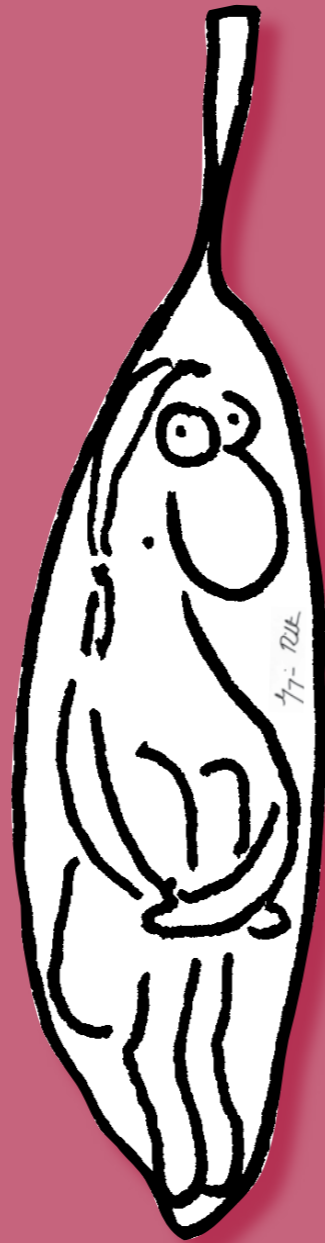
When you hit puberty, things change. Girls start to turn into women, and boys start to turn into men. The body changes and the way you look at the world often changes too.

Puberty is a gradual thing and everyone goes through it. Puberty happens to you even while you are getting your homework done, swimming at the beach, or going to the movies. It is the body's way of making it possible for you to have a baby later in life.

Whether you are a girl or a boy, you will experience the physical and emotional changes of adolescence. For girls, puberty can begin between 9 and 11 years old. For boys, it's around 12 or 13. But it can begin earlier or later for boys or girls – everyone is different.

Puberty is a time of many changes. Sometimes when you're in the middle of it, you might feel there is no one to talk to. Want to know something scary? Parents often understand more than you would think! Don't forget, they went through puberty too. If you don't want to talk to your parents, you could try talking to a trusted relative or friend. Saying things out loud can be a good way of getting things clear in your mind.

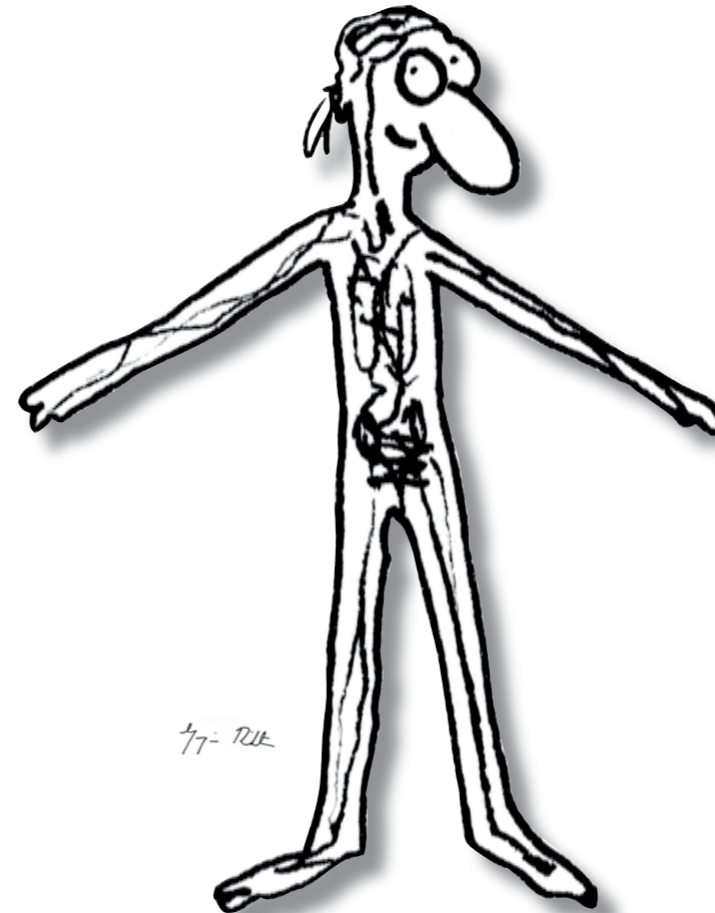
So you know all about the lifecycle of a butterfly? And you know why it's important to look after your body? Most of this puberty stuff you have probably already picked up from somewhere - books, movies, the school nurse, the Net, your mates, but do you know the whole story?



Are there things you have ever wondered about...
but haven't dared to ask?

What's inside?

It's you!



On the following pages, you will find useful information and advice about what happens to your body during puberty.

Things that change

- **Breasts** (range in size, nipples, bras, breast checking) *see page 4*
- **Getting hips** (hips, thighs) *see page 4*
- **Body hair** (armpits, arms, legs, around vulva) *see page 5*
- **Your genitals** (vulva, clitoris, vagina) *see page 5*
- **Reproductive system** (uterus, ovaries) *see page 6*
- **Getting your period** (menstruation, when, how long, pads, tampons) *see page 7*
- **Other vaginal fluid** (what to expect) *see page 10*

Looking after yourself

- **Eat right and exercise** *see page 10*
- **Acne and pimples** *see page 11*
- **Sweat** *see page 11*

Conclusion

Further information *see page 12*

Things that change

During puberty, your body changes to the way it is going to be when you are an adult. You will probably gain weight, just as you have done since you were a baby. This is perfectly normal.

Breasts

In most girls, the first sign of puberty is when breasts start to develop. You might be 8, or you might be 13 when this happens. Either way, this age range is perfectly normal. You may also find that your nipple area becomes more sensitive at the start of puberty.

Breasts come in all shapes and sizes. Some girls worry about the size of their breasts and think they are too big, or too small. Some girls worry about the shape of their nipples. There is no one right way for breasts to be. All breasts, whatever the size or the shape, are capable of producing enough milk to feed a baby when the time comes. That's the beauty of their design.

When should I get a bra?

There is no set time when it is right to start wearing a bra. Don't believe everything the fashion industry tells you! It is a good idea to talk it through with a trusted older female first. Then, have someone experienced come with you when shopping for bras. That way you can make sure that you buy a bra with good support that will suit your needs, especially if you play sport (or wear a lot of strapless ball gowns!).

Getting hips

During puberty, you will gain some weight as your pelvic region begins to alter so that your body will be capable of bearing children later in life. During this process, your hips may widen and your thighs may become more rounded.

Have a look at the other women in your family. Their body shapes are probably the form your own body will take. You will see other bodies too, especially in magazines and on TV. Sometimes it is hard to avoid comparing your own with these and feeling you are too tall or too short, too fat or thin. Most problems and dissatisfactions arise from comparison. Try to remember that there is no one 'perfect' shape. Women come in all shapes and sizes. If you are happy and healthy and comfortable with your body, then you will find it easier to be happy being you.



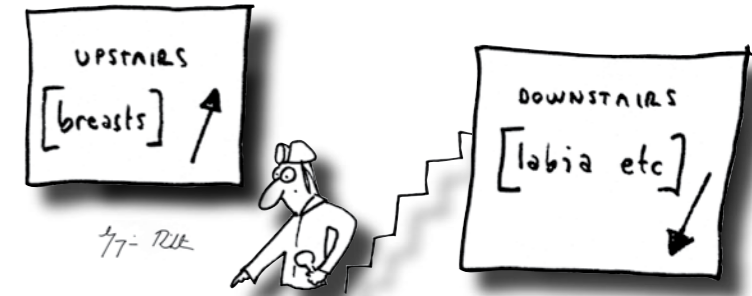
Body hair

As you go through puberty, you will start to notice hair under your arms and in your pubic area. This will be fine and straight at first, and will become thicker and curlier as you get older. You may also find that you have more hair on your legs.

Should I shave?

Some women choose to shave or wax the hair under their arms, around their pubic area and on their legs. There is no health reason for doing this. It is a matter of choice. You might like to talk your decision over with a parent or a trusted adult before you do it. Avoid sharing razors with other people.

You might also find there is more hair on your arms and face than before. This is normal. Hair growth will probably slow down once your hormones have settled down. It is probably more noticeable to you than to anyone else, but if it is worrying you, there are safe ways of removing unwanted hair growth. Again, it's probably a good idea to talk about it first with a parent or an adult that you trust.

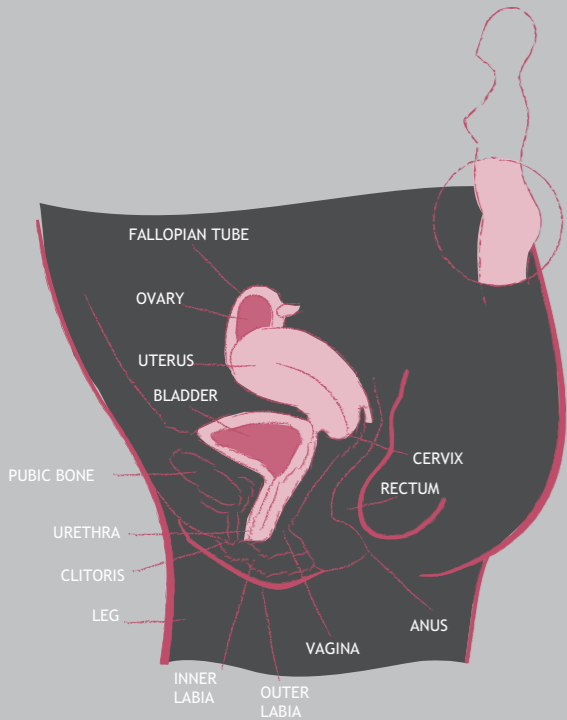


Your genitals (Sex organs)

Your genitals are made of many parts and are difficult to see. You can use a hand-held mirror to become more familiar with your own body.

The vulva is the outside part of a woman's genitals. The vulva includes pubic hair, the inner and outer vaginal lips (labia), the clitoris and the openings of the vagina and urethra. The urethra is the tube which carries urine away from the bladder. The outer labia are the large fleshy lips which cover the vulva. The inner labia are the folds of skin that protect the entrance to the vagina and urethra. The inner labia may be covered by the outer labia. But it is also quite normal for them to extend outside. Every woman's labia are different in shape and size.

The clitoris is just above the urethra. The part of the clitoris you can see is only the tip. This tip is about the size of a pea. It has many sensitive nerve endings. It also has a shaft which extends into the body. When you feel sexually excited, the clitoris fills with blood and swells. When the clitoris is stroked or rubbed, this pleasurable feeling can produce an even more pleasurable and exciting sensation called an orgasm.



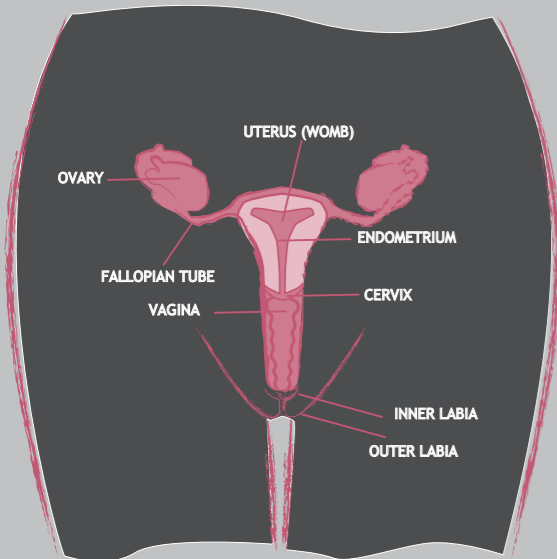
The vagina is a stretchy tube made of expandable muscle. It is about 9 cm long and leads from the cervix to the outside of the body. When you get your period, menstrual fluid leaves your body through the vagina. Your vagina is where a baby passes at birth. It is also where the penis enters the body during sexual intercourse. When you are sexually excited, it is quite normal for the vagina to become moist.

Reproductive system

The **uterus**, or womb, is a hollow, pear-shaped organ. It can expand up to 50 cm in length during pregnancy. Two **fallopian tubes**, one on each side, stretch from the ovaries to the uterus. These tubes carry an egg from one of the ovaries each month, gently moving it along to the uterus.

The **ovaries** are glands which produce female sex hormones and egg cells (**ova**). Each ovary is only the size of an almond, but it contains 150,000 to 200,000 eggs. Every month, from puberty until you reach menopause, one of your ovaries will release one egg (sometimes more, but this is not common). Each egg is around the size of a pinhead. The time when an egg is released is called **ovulation**.

The bottom of the uterus is connected to the upper part of the vagina by the **cervix**. The cervix produces mucus. In the days leading up to ovulation, this mucus becomes clear in appearance, and elastic and slippery. During intercourse, this mucus helps sperm from the male reach the uterus and fallopian tubes. If a sperm joins with the egg, this is called **fertilisation**. The fertilised egg travels to the uterus and when it attaches to the lining of the uterus, a pregnancy begins.



Getting your period

What happens when I get my period?

Each month, the uterus prepares for a possible pregnancy. The lining of the uterus thickens into a cushion of blood vessels, glands and liquid. If you become pregnant, this lining will be what nourishes a fertilised egg. If the egg is not fertilised, then the lining (mostly blood and some fluid) passes out through the vagina. This bleeding is called a period, or menstruation.

How long does my period last?

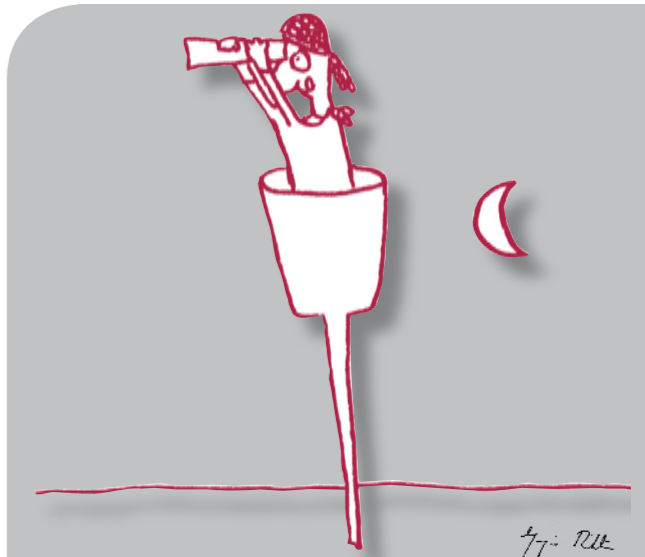
A period generally lasts about five days. The first day of bleeding in each cycle is called Day 1. Sometimes you may bleed for as little as two days, or sometimes for as many as eight. This range is totally normal. The process of preparing the uterus lining for a pregnancy and then disposing of the lining takes around a month (just like the phases of the moon!). This process is called the menstrual cycle. Periods generally come every 28 days, but this can vary. Especially during the first two or three years, your period may be very irregular. You might have two in a row and then go several months without having a period at all. You will also find that your blood flow varies (it might be heavy, or light) on different days of your period.

How old will I be when I first get my period?

There is no way of knowing when your first period will come. It will probably arrive sometime between the ages of 10 and 14 years. But it may be earlier or later. Every girl is different. If you have not begun to menstruate by the time you are 17, talk to your doctor about it. Women usually stop having their periods between the ages of 45 and 55. This is called menopause.

How can I plan for my period?

Once you have your period, it's a good idea to keep some pads or tampons ready at home. You can also keep some in your school bag. On Day 1, you might only notice a slight brownish stain on your underwear, but some girls start with more, so it is easier to cope if you're prepared.



Aboard HMAS Monthly, Beryl keeps a lookout for her first period.

If your first period starts while you are out and about, or at a party, and you are not prepared, then you can temporarily make a pad from tissues or toilet paper and put this in your underwear. If you are at school when your first period comes, your teachers and school nurses will be able to help you. They are used to these things happening, so don't be afraid to ask them even if you are not prepared.

Should I choose pads or tampons?

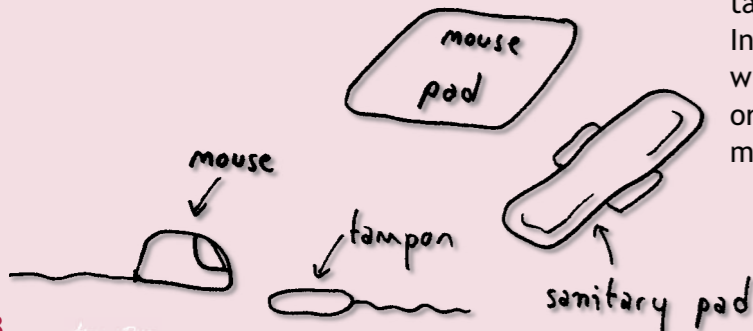
During your period, you can choose to use sanitary pads, which you stick inside your underwear, or tampons, which you insert inside your vagina. There are many different types of pads and tampons. It is important to find something that you find comfortable using. You might want to talk it over with a parent, older sister, cousin, school nurse or an adult that you trust. Whatever products you choose, it is important that you change them frequently - every 3 or 4 hours during the day. Your menstrual fluid has no odour until it meets the air. But a pad or tampon that is left in place too long can begin to smell and it can lead to infection.

How do I get the tampon in?

You will find instructions for insertion (and pictures) in every tampon packet. Tampons are popular with many girls because they allow you to do everything you normally do, including swimming. There is a big range to choose from, including some with applicators, which you may find useful at the beginning. There are also several 'slim' versions. When your tampon is properly inserted, you won't be able to feel it at all.

If you do use tampons, you must change them frequently. Though this depends a bit on your blood flow, you should change the tampon three to six times a day. If you leave a tampon in for longer than eight hours, the tampon absorbs too much of the protective fluid in your vagina, and there is a small chance of getting a serious infection: toxic shock syndrome (TSS). TSS causes sudden high fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, headache, muscle pain and rash. For this reason it is a good idea to use a pad, rather than a tampon, at night. You can also reduce the risk of TSS by not using super (high-absorbency) tampons unless your flow is heavy.

Wash your hands before and after inserting tampons. Handle them as little as possible. Insert the tampon gently. Find a position in which you are comfortable, such as squatting, or sitting on the toilet. Using a hand-held mirror can help you see what you are doing.



How do I get the tampon out?

A tampon won't slip out if it is placed beyond the muscles at the entrance of the vagina. It can't get lost inside you either.

Remember to leave the string hanging out to make removal easier. Don't forget to take one tampon out before putting another one in. Always remove the last one when your period is finished. Wrap used pads and tampons in toilet paper and dispose of them in the bin.

Are there some things I can't do when I have my period?

When you've got your period, you can do everything you always do: run, ride, play sport, dance. If you swim, it's best to use a tampon. But if your period is heavy, or if you feel uncomfortable and you don't want to be active - don't. It's up to you. You should shower, have a bath and wash your hair as usual. In fact, the sweat glands are more active during menstruation, so you can probably aim to keep even cleaner than normal! If your bleeding is so heavy it stops you from doing normal activities, then talk to your school nurse or a doctor.

Will I get period pain?

Just before a period begins, you might feel an uncomfortable ache in the stomach or pelvic area. This can last for the first 12 hours. Some girls say they feel more bloated and heavy at this time. Some girls experience slight diarrhoea just before a period. Constipation is

common too. If this happens to you, drink more water, eat extra fruit and vegetables as well as wholemeal bread and cereals. Try to exercise regularly. You should not have to use laxatives.

You may also find yourself feeling more emotional, or moody, some time before your period begins. Not every girl experiences these symptoms. They soon disappear after your period starts.

Some women and girls experience cramping and stomach pain during their periods. Cramping may be caused by too much of a hormone which causes the uterus to contract or tighten. If you do have pain during your period, try some stretches or other exercise, or curl up with a heated wheatbag or a hot-water bottle on the painful area. If this doesn't work, it is possible to take pain relief. Talk to a parent, doctor or the chemist about what kind of relief will be appropriate for you.

7 said cramp, not tampon



Other vaginal fluid

During the days of your menstrual cycle when you are not bleeding, the cervix still produces secretions or discharge. This is a small amount of fluid which keeps the walls of the vagina clean and slowly leaks to the outside. This fluid usually dries to a creamy yellow colour on your underwear.

You might notice differences in these secretions at different times of your cycle. As we discussed above, for example, the mucus will become clear in appearance in the days leading up to ovulation. Sexual excitement also produces vaginal secretions. This is normal and healthy.

Do I need to keep my vagina clean?

Vaginal fluids help the vagina to be self-cleaning, so you don't need to wash inside the vagina (douche) and you don't need to use perfumed sprays. It is best to avoid plastic-backed panty liners for every day use. They don't allow air to circulate. This can cause a hot, moist breeding ground for bacteria and may lead to infection.

When should I worry about a vaginal discharge?

If you have a continuous, heavy vaginal discharge, this might be a sign you have an infection. For instance, a thick, white and cheesy discharge with a yeasty smell is a symptom of thrush. When you have thrush, the first thing you notice is vaginal itching. Thrush is a very common condition and it can be treated easily.

Some other infections can also cause vaginal discharge. If you have a discharge that is not normal for you, or if you experience any sores or itchiness in your genital area, then you should see your doctor immediately.

Looking after yourself

EAT RIGHT AND EXERCISE

With all these monumental changes in your body, it is important to look after yourself well. Treat your body as you would treat the family pet!

If you give your body the fuel it needs to grow, and if you give it regular exercise, you will be giving yourself the best chance to feel good about yourself.

*Good food and exercise.
Sounds simple, doesn't it?
And it is.*

What's good?	What's not?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A well-balanced diet. Include lots of fresh fruit and vegies and plenty of water.• Exercise! If you don't enjoy sport, try hitting the dance floor (or the lounge room) with friends. Choose something active that you enjoy - that way you'll keep doing it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fatty foods. Fried foods. Sugary foods (pastries, biscuits, chips, lollies).• Stay away from crash diets. They don't work.• Being a couch potato.

Acne and pimples

In puberty your body is a hormone-producing machine. The production of new hormones also affects your sebaceous (oil-producing) glands and your sweat glands.

Pimples are caused by over-activity of the sebaceous glands. These glands lie just under the skin. They produce sebum - the natural oil that keeps your skin supple. During puberty, your hormones make the sebaceous glands grow bigger and produce extra sebum. This sebum is often thicker and flows more slowly, so it tends to clog the pores, causing pimples. When pimples become very inflamed, this condition is called acne. Some teenagers are troubled by pimples and acne for several years. There is no single treatment to suit everybody.

How can I look after my skin?

Frequent, gentle washing with warm water and a mild soap or face wash can help. Dirt doesn't cause acne, but washing can get rid of excess sebum. You may also find that certain foods make your pimples worse. Cut down on these. Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegies and drink plenty of water. If your skin is really bothering you, then see your doctor.

Sweat

Once you have reached puberty, you may also find that you sweat more. Remember that sweating is a normal human function. The healthiest of sports people may lose buckets of sweat out on the sports field!

By itself, sweat does not have much of a smell but bacteria which live on the skin can create a smell called body odour or BO.

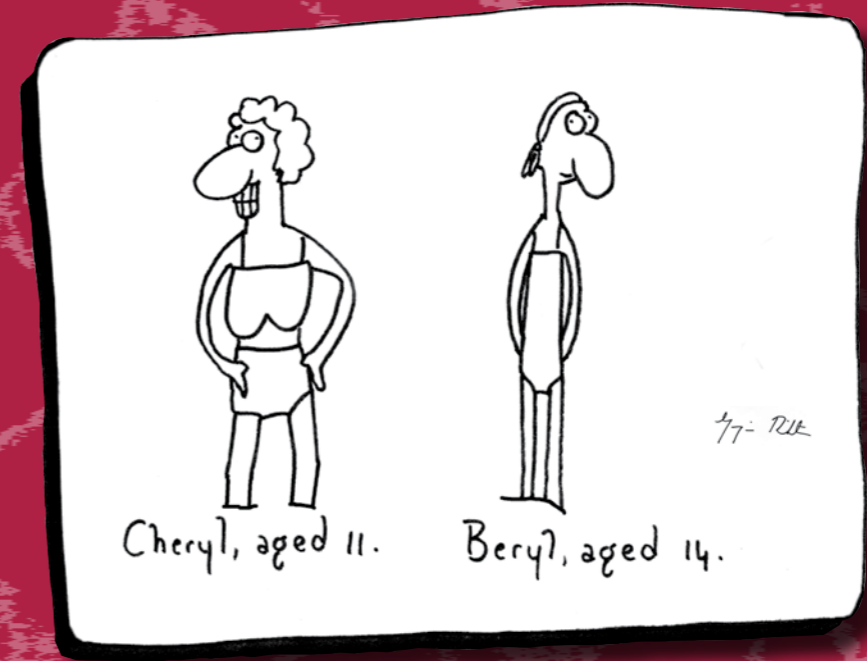
To avoid body odour, wash your body at least once a day, especially the underarm area, using mild soap and warm water. Change and wash your clothes often, including your socks. It helps to wear loose fitting clothing, made from natural fibres. An underarm deodorant may be useful, too. Worrying about body odour is one of the many things that people get needlessly anxious about. If you bathe and wash your clothes regularly, it is very unlikely you will have a problem.

Conclusion

Puberty is a time of many changes, both physical and emotional. Some of these changes are exciting, others are daunting. Don't forget that there are adults around you who can help you through the tricky times.

When you emerge at the other end, you will be well on the way to becoming an adult.

If you want some useful information and advice about sex, love and relationships, look out for the book of 'Relationships, sex and other stuff' available from good school nurses everywhere!



Original cartoons by Georgia Richter

Further information

If you have any sort of problem you want to talk about confidentially with a trained counsellor
Kids Help Line - (24 hours) - 1800 55 1800

A great site with lots of answers for 10 to 12 year olds, especially about puberty
The Hormone Factory
www.thehormonefactory.com

A good site for teenagers
Queensland Health Youth Site
www.health.qld.gov.au/istaysafe

For general health information
HealthInfo - 1300 135 030
Free pamphlets and information
www.population.health.wa.gov.au/ordering/

For information about sexual health and contraception
Sexual Health Helpline - (08) 9227 6178.
Country callers - 1800 198 205
www.fpwa.org.au

If you have been sexually abused or assaulted
Sexual Assault Resource Centre (24 hours)
(08) 9340 1828. Country callers - 1800 199 888



Delivering a Healthy WA



Department of
Health

© Department of Health, 2007